

Blake, Whitney and PLASMA: A Thousand Shades of Grey

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Summary: The world isn't just black and white. But who cares about all that drivel? Join reluctant hero Blake Stormheart, non-reluctant heroine Whitney Blazeheart and friends old and new as they cross the vast and mostly explored land of Unova, facing self-righteous legends, the mysterious P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation and more, in this none-too-serious adaptation of Pok  mon: Black and White!

## 1. Chapter 1: Flying the Metaphorical Nest

**\*\*~Introduction (updated on 25/02/2015)~\*\***

This story is an expanded, semi-comedic adaptation of the fifth-generation Pok  mon games, Pok  mon Black Edition and Pok  mon White Edition, set in a beautiful (I hope) hybrid of the anim   and game worlds. In terms of action, violence and appeal to older readers it is most like the manga, but I have done my best to follow the original games' storylines, expanding them where necessary.

Blake and Whitney are, respectively, based on the male and female player characters for the game. I have taken a few liberties with how Bianca and Cheren are portrayed, but that's how I perceive them. If you've got a problem with that, make your own adaptation. I have also gone to great lengths to promote gender equality, racial equality and all other kinds of equality, so bigots are advised to read something else.

In this universe, Ash Ketchum and all his companions exist. However, he never comes to Unova, instead deciding to take Dawn on a tour of Kanto. He will not make any appearances in this story other than in this foreword. I might write about his and Dawn's adventures once I've finished this story, maybe in Kalos, but don't hold your breath. I'm a busy man.

New chapters are generally uploaded between three days and three weeks after the previous chapter.

**\*\*~Chapter One: Leaving the Nest and Taking Flight~\*\***

"For crying out loud, where is she?!"

Blake had been waiting on his bed for over an hour. Bianca had been meant to arrive twenty minutes ago, and she was showing no signs of getting any closer. "I mean, she's been waiting to get her first pokémon for five years, and..." Blake trailed off, aware that Cheren, his other, more timely friend, wasn't really listening. He decided to try something.

"Hey, is that a group of hydreigons out there destroying the town?!" cried Blake, nudging Cheren on the shoulder.

"Yes, of course. Very interesting," said Cheren, still staring through his stylish glasses at the book in his hands.

Ordinarily, Blake would have given Cheren one of his most utterly exasperated sighs, but today was different. Today, he was too excited for petty squabbles. Today was, so far, the second-best day of his life. Bianca, the rather excitable girl who lived next door, was bringing the two lads their first pokémon, courtesy of their neighbour Professor Juniper. The professor was said to be the cleverest person in the entire Unova region, so she knew that when she needed something done, it was best to recruit a group of teenagers with attitude and get them to do it. Blake wasn't sure he or his mates had much in the way of attitude, but they all loved pokémon, so it would probably turn out all right.

"Maybe we should go and look for Bianca," suggested Blake, getting restlessly to his feet. Cheren nodded his approval, so Blake took his red-and-white hat from the hatstand by the door (by the time Ash Ketchum had saved the world a few times, they were the height of fashion for pokémon trainers), stepped carefully over a pile of books on the landing, and was just about to go down the stairs when a bundle of joy almost collided with him.

"Hiya!" the bundle of joy greeted him.

"Hi, Bianca. Don't worry, our beards haven't started growing yet," Blake greeted her.

Bianca looked sheepish.

"So, you have pokémon for us to raise, I take it?" asked Cheren, emerging from Blake's bedroom with a slightly amused look in his eyes.

"Yep! They're in here," replied Bianca. She stood up and reached into her handbag. She paused, looking slightly confused, and rushed off downstairs.

"Oh, for crying out-" began Cheren.

"Here we are!" said Bianca cheerily, making her way slightly more carefully up the stairs. She was holding three small spheres, each of which was red on one half and white on the other, with a white button in between. Blake and Cheren instantly recognised them as pokéballs: pocket-sized devices to hold pokémon while their

trainers weren't battling with them.

"As agreed, an oshawott for Blake," said Bianca, handing Blake one of the poké-balls.

"Thanks!" Blake thanked her, accepting the ball with a rising sense of excitement.

"And as for Mr Snooty-Pants, here, what else but a snivy?" Bianca continued, handing Cheren the second poké-ball.

"Snooty-pants?!" cried Cheren. "I merely happen to be a talented scholar and a connoisseur of haute cuisine with a mellifluous tongue and an extensive vocabulary of terminology and obscure dialect phrases: one who is infinitely superior to you in every way."

"That's what I meant, snooty-pants!" giggled Bianca, pressing the poké-ball into his hand.

"Bianca, you're fourteen. Grow up," suggested Cheren heavily.

"Well, so are you," Blake pointed out reasonably. Cheren glared at him.

Bianca cleared her throat. "Anyway, this last pokémon's gonna be my special friend. He's a tepig," she said proudly, showing off a third poké-ball. "Professor Juniper says we should bond with them, then go and see her tomorrow 'cause she has a mission for us, and my dad says we can use the little hollow next to Braviary's Talon to practise battling. He wants me to be good at it before I need to leave home so I won't get hurt." Braviary's Talon was what people from Nuvema Town called the old, pointy-looking watchtower next to Route 1, after Unova's most powerful flying-type pokémon.

"Jolly good," said Cheren levelly.

"Awesometastic!" Blake agreed, not levelly at all. Ever since he knew what pokémon were, he'd wanted to meet as many of them as he could; and if he won gym badges, took on the Unova League and became famed in song and legend in the process, so much the better. And now that it was actually happening, just saying "fantastic" or "awesome" simply wouldn't be enough to emphasize how excited he was.

"Come on, you two!" suggested Blake, rushing off downstairs, gleefully aware of the Oshawott's poké-ball resting in his hand. He skidded to a halt in the hallway beside his mother's collection of antique swords and battle trophies, which she was admiring.

"Me, Bianca and Cheren are going out for a bit, Mum," he informed her, after making sure she wasn't so deep in her reminiscences as to mistake him for an enemy.

"Okay. What'll you be doing?" she asked.

"Oh, just hanging out..." Blake replied reservedly. "With our pokémon!" he added, proudly showing off the poké-ball in his hand.

"Oh, wow!" Blake's mother cried, admiring the poké-ball. She noticed

Cheren and Bianca arriving more sedately behind her and her son. "I expect the three of you'll be off to bring glory to Nuvema Town and vanquish the forces of evil, then."

"Possibly," said Cheren reservedly.

"But we're mostly just gonna have fun," Bianca added.

"Good! You should never take these things too seriously," Blake's mother advised her. "Unless you actually are vanquishing the forces of evil, in which case you should definitely take it very seriously. Otherwise you'll be killed. You see, the thing about the forces of evil is they've no qualms with hurting children and using dishonourable tactics. One of you should probably learn some sort of martial arts, or I could teach you how to..." she trailed off. Blake, Cheren and Bianca were long gone.

\* \* \*

><p>"All right, tepig, I choose yooouuuu!" shouted Bianca. She pirouetted a few times, leapt in the air and threw her tepig's pokÃ©-ball across the shallow, grassy hollow in front of Braviary's Talon. Blake noticed with approval that she was copying the form of all the best pokÃ©mon trainers from films and TV; assuredly a very practical and realistic method of calling out pokÃ©mon. Cheren merely raised an eyebrow.<p>

The poké-ball landed and immediately split in two, revealing a glowing red core of energy. There was a blinding flash of light, after which Bianca's tepig was standing in front of the poké-ball. The poké-ball flew back to Bianca's hand as if by magic, attracting a curious look from the little pokémon.

"So that's a tepig," commented Blake. He'd tepigs before, but never up close and personal like this in such a quiet place as Nuvema Town.

"Oh, wow, he's so cute and snuggly!" cried Bianca, rushing over to her tepig. Cuteness was by far her greatest concession to gender stereotypes. The tepig was an orange quadruped with a pig-like nose and snout, a black patch around his waist, more black around his wide, ovoid eyes, and a yellow patch between his long, round ears, which were also black. He was about knee-high, and his curly tail was tipped with a red orb.

"Tep?" said the tepig curiously.

"My name's Bianca. I'll be your trainer from now on," Bianca informed the tepig, kneeling so he could get a better look at her.

"Tepig?" said the tepig curiously.

"I think I'll call you Templeton," proposed Bianca.

"Tep tepig tep," acknowledged the tepig. Templeton lay down in front of Bianca, looking content. Bianca looked at him for a few moments, slightly put out by his lack of cheer and joi de vivre, then shrugged and turned to Blake and Cheren.

"Your turn!" Bianca declared.

"When you say 'your turn', which 'your' do you refer to? Me or Cheren?" asked Blake.

"To which 'your' do you refer? Blake or I?" said Cheren, with grammatical smugness.

"For that remark, it'll be my turn!" retorted Blake, throwing his oshawott's poké-ball over to Bianca and her tepig. From within materialised a small, blue-and-white bipedal pokémon with a round head, a cute little yellow nose, flat ears, and a cream-coloured shell on her belly.

"Osha!" the oshawott shouted, somersaulting over to Templeton, taking the shell off her tummy in the process. Holding her shell in the 'en garde' position, she kicked Templeton on the nose.

"Hey! What do you think your oshawott's doing?!" demanded Bianca. "For that matter, what does she think she's doing and what does she think you're doing and what do you think you're doing hurting my poor, innocent little tepig like this?!"

"Don't look at me!" protested Blake.

"Some pokémon are naturally more aggressive than others. This particular oshawott is a warrior, through and through," Cheren suggested.

"Oh. Listen, Oshawott, that tepig's your friend, or at least a non-enemy acquaintance," he declared.

"Osha?! Oshawott wott osha!" protested the oshawott, turning her back very meaningfully on Blake. Blake stared in disbelief. This wasn't how pokémon were supposed to be. Blake was aware that Cheren was smirking at him, which couldn't be allowed. He knew there were two ways to gain the trust and loyalty of pokémon, so he promptly chose the wrong one.

"Oshawott, I am your master, and you will obey me! Now kneel before me and beg my forgiveness, or so help me, I'll-" a blob of mud splattered onto his face. After wiping it off, he saw the oshawott standing beside a small mud patch, carefully preparing an arsenal of mud balls. Cheren, Bianca and Templeton were watching from a safe distance.

"Okay, Oshawott, perhaps we've got off on the wrong foot," said Blake placatingly, sitting down in a completely non-threatening way in front of the oshawott. "My name's Blake Stormheart. Pleased to meet you," he declared, never one to miss an opportunity to remind people his surname was Stormheart. Blake offered the oshawott his hand. She glared at the hand with undisguised contempt.

"Do you have a name?" Blake persisted. The oshawott made no reply. "Is it... uh..." the oshawott sounded female, so, "Jemima?" asked Blake. She shook her head. "Is it Francine?" The oshawott shook her head. "Simone? Arlene? Caitlin? Sophie? Darina? Wendy? Tethys? Vicky? Taylor? Nadia? Brianna? Laurel?" Blake persisted. The oshawott rolled her eyes. Of all the humans in all the world, she had to end up saddled with this one?! Then again, his dogged persistence was heartening.

"Osha! Oshawott wott wott," the oshawott interrupted Blake, making a few meaningful hand gestures.

"What? Don't you have a name? Or is it something unpronounceable?" asked Blake.

"Keep trying. You'll get it sooner or later," suggested Bianca.

"All right, then... Is your name Samantha?" asked Blake. The oshawott looked surprised for a moment, then nodded.

"Okay then, you're Samantha! Pleased to meet you, Samantha," said Blake happily, shaking her by the hand.

"I love a happy ending!" said Bianca cheerily.

"What do you mean, happy ending?! We still haven't seen my beautiful snivy," Cheren pointed out. "I choose you, snivy!" he added, lobbing his poké-ball onto the grass. It released a slender green pokémon, with its pointy snout and whiplike, leaf-tipped tail making it look like a snake with legs.

"Snivy! Snivy sni!" the snivy greeted Cheren.

"Ooh!" commented Bianca.

"Greetings and salutations, young snivy," said Cheren formally. "I am Cheren, son of Gerald and Christobel, and firstborn of the House of McTavish, and I am your new trainer. May I say what an honour it is to have such a fine young lady as yourself in my team?"

"Snive?" asked the snivy, looking curiously at Cheren. "Snivy!" she added happily, noticing the mud Samantha had been throwing at Blake. She ran over to the mud and started splodging around with reckless abandon, splattering Samantha, who quickly clambered up onto Blake's shoulder to get out of reach.

Cheren stared in disbelief. "But... snivies are supposed to be refined..."

"Well, tepigs are supposed to be all playful and excited," Bianca pointed out. Templeton was lying peacefully on the ground, occasionally letting out a puff of white smoke from his nose. Were it not for that smoke, he could easily be mistaken for a cuddly toy.

"And as for Samantha, whoever heard of an oshawott not getting on with its trainer?" Blake asked, giving Samantha a meaningful look. She did not react.

"I suppose we all have misfit pokémon, then. Now, Snivy, what shared interests do we have? If we are to bond as Professor Juniper suggested, it will help if we have something in common," said Cheren. Like most pokémon trainers, he was using his snivy's species as her name. "I don't imagine you are interested in poetry, natural history, computing, science or art, so... How about battling?"

Snivy perked up. "Snivy!" she said happily, striking a heroic pose on a small rock near the mud.

"Excellent! Now, Templeton's asleep, so how about a duel between yourself and Samantha?" proposed Cheren. "I know all the local pok mon species by heart, so don't worry about me not having any snivy-related experience."

"Ah, now..." said Blake unsurely.

"You do want to become a great pok mon trainer, do you not?" asked Cheren.

"Of course! Samantha, how about it?" asked Blake.

"Osha..." replied Samantha, meaning something along the lines of "If I must..."

"In that case, I'll be the referee. Trainers, take positions at opposite sides of the battlefield!" commanded Bianca. Blake and Cheren shook hands in a formal, honourable sort of way, then headed in opposite directions until they were about ten metres apart. Samantha and Snivy followed their trainers, looking fierce battle-ready.

"The battle will be one-on-one, finishing if and when one of the pok mon is unable or refuses to battle!" declared Bianca, having memorised all the refereeing speeches from her favourite TV programmes. "No cheating, mind, or I'll tell your parents. Start fighting... now!"

Blake and Samantha looked into each other's eyes, single-mindedly determined for victory. Although they had started out as enemies, it was clear that between them-

"Use leer," commanded Cheren. Snivy nodded, then glared at Samantha with murderous hatred, rapidly reducing Samantha's defensive capabilities. Don't ask me to explain why, it's just what leering does.

Blake blinked. "Um, Samantha, let's respond with-"

"Tackle," ordered Cheren, and he gave a satisfied smirk as Snivy smashed into Samantha, knocking the oshawott onto her back.

Blake cringed. Samantha was doing badly, possibly because he was taking too long to think of what to do. "Water gun!" he ordered, it being the first water-type attack in his mind.

Samantha put her head in her hands. Cheren sigheded, looking at Blake with a cross between amusement and pity. "Oh, Blake... First of all, your oshawott is not powerful enough to use water gun yet. Second, even if she was, water gun would be ineffective against Snivy. You have a lot to learn before we embark on whatever mission Professor Juniper has in store for us. I'll tell you what, Snivy and I will put an end to this quickly. Tackle!"

"Jump as high as you can!" shouted Blake. He had no idea why that particular sentence entered his mind, but it worked. Samantha leapt high above Snivy, whose momentum caused her to crash into Blake's legs.

Cheren's eyes widened. "Er... quick, Snivy, turn around and use tackle again!"

"Samantha, counter-tackle her from the side!" ordered Blake, staggering slightly as Snivy pushed off from his knees. Samantha rushed over to the oncoming Snivy, cartwheeled away to the left and bore Snivy to the ground.

"Use leer while she's down!" commanded Blake, looking triumphant. Samantha, also looking triumphant, leered at Snivy with all her might as the leafy snake clambered to her feet, equalising the two pok mon's defences. Victory was surely near; all he had to do was-

"Tackle," ordered Cheren calmly. Snivy charged at Samantha, sending her flying. Samantha struggled to her feet, clearly hurt, but still with a fiery heart.

"Argh... Bloomin' distraction..." muttered Blake. Cheren was famous throughout Nuvema Town for his love of computer games, so he had probably learnt complete concentration from many long hours spent gaming. Compared to him, Blake was living in cloud cuckoo land. "Tackle, and give it some welly!" he ordered. Samantha ran at Snivy, putting all her strength into the charge.

"We'll use tackle too," said Cheren levelly. Snivy rushed at Samantha. The two pok mon collided like atoms in a particle accelerator, glaring furiously at each other as they vied for position in midair. Then the laws of physics won out, Snivy and Samantha fell to the ground and slowly keeled over. Blake and Cheren both sighed with relief.

"Both pok mon are unable to battle, so the battle ends in a tie! Congratulations, Blake and Cheren, you've both won!" declared Bianca happily. Blake smiled at her as he picked Samantha up. The little blue otter was bruised in several places, but he knew she would be fine. As everyone knew, when pok mon became badly injured in a battle, they would enter a deep healing trance, and were referred to as having fainted. It still pained him, though, to see Samantha looking like that.

"You fought well, Samantha. I'm sorry I wasn't really on the ball at the start of the battle," he said softly.

"You may not be a lady, Snivy, but you certainly are a warrior. Good try," agreed Cheren, who would never allow Blake to outdo his compassion.

Bianca looked at Templeton. "Do you think you could fight like that?" she asked.

"Tep," replied Templeton.

\* \* \*

><p>And thus did it come to pass that the three Nuvema Town teenagers and their three pok mon companions trained long into the night, growing stronger by the hour. Snivy, Templeton and Samantha's power grew with the blazing spirits of their trainers, until all six were certain nothing could stand in their way. And all too soon (i.e.



tomorrow morning), Blake, Bianca and a few other villagers were waiting outside the gates of Nuvema Town for Cheren and Professor Juniper.<p>

"...I mean, really! The one time his timeliness might come in handy, and he's not here!" Blake complained. He looked to see Bianca's reaction, only to discover she was deep in conversation with her father, known outside his family only as Mr Redwood. He was a serious, bearded man, currently showing Bianca a stack of books.

"This one's about how to raise strong, healthy pok  mon..." he handed his daughter a well-thumbed hardback, "...and this is the Hitchhiker's Guide to Unova..." he handed Bianca a paperback, also well read, "...and here's my personal favourite, How to Train your Dragonite!" He handed Bianca the last book, a fairly new book with a picture of a dragonite, a salamence and a hydreigon fighting above a snowy peak.

"Thanks, Daddy, but I already know most of this. You know, 'cause you wouldn't even let me watch pok  mon stuff on TV until I knew as much as Professor Juniper?" Bianca pointed out. "At least before I melted your cattle prod."

"...I'd never have actually used it," said Mr Redwood, momentarily wrongfooted. "Anyway, there's a lot of information in these books, Bianca. Who knows when you'll desperately need some little bit of information you happen to have forgotten? Besides, your bag's got mass dampening technology. It won't weigh you down."

"All right, then," said Bianca.

"That's my girl!" Mr Redwood reached inside his pocket. "Now, do you know how to use a whistle and pepper spray? Oh, and I think I've got a life jacket in here..."

Blake's mum rolled her eyes. "Honestly, if he had his way she'd still be in nappies!"

Mr Redwood, who had good hearing, rounded on her. "Oh?! And just who are you to question my methods, Ravyn? You haven't prepared Blake at all!"

"Actually, Mr Redwood, she taught me karate and fencing. I'm not even remotely good at either of them, but she did prepare me," Blake pointed out.

Mr Redwood shot him a withering look. "...Anyway, Bianca, if you get attacked by a wild pok  mon and your own pok  mon aren't able to protect you, spray this in its eyes. If it doesn't have eyes, whistle to attract help, and if your whistle's broken, scream. If you can't scream... well... Are you sure you want to be a pok  mon trainer?"

"Absolutely!" replied Bianca, with hundred percent certainty.

"Thought so..." sighed Mr Redwood.

Any further conversation was stopped in its tracks by a shout from

afar. "Behold greatness, mortals! Cheren the Magnificent is here!" roared Cheren, as he strode over to the group, his black leather cape billowing out behind him. On top of that, he had walking boots, a rakish brown hat, a scarf and a walking stick. Snivy's poké-ball hung from his belt along with five others, testament either to how well prepared he was or how much his parents doted on him.

"Cheren! What the...?! I mean...!" cried Bianca.

"Well, here I am!" declared Cheren, doing a little twirl so everyone could see his outfit. Blake looked at Bianca, giving her an almost imperceptible eye-roll.

"That cape is woefully impractical! It could get caught on a branch, weigh you down in the water, make you easier to see..." ranted Mr Redwood. "You should've followed Blake and Bianca's example."

As per his words, Blake was wearing all-weather trousers, his blatant-Ash-ripoff hat and a blue jacket, and Bianca was wearing a white dress, an orange tank top, red trousers and fairly nondescript shoes.

"I'm sorry, everyone, we couldn't stop him," said Cheren's long-suffering mother Christobel, looking apologetic. Blake was about to say something when a tall, stylish woman appeared as if out of nowhere, clapping her hands for attention. It was Professor Juniper.

"Friends, Unovans, pokémon, lend me your ears!" she shouted. "You may be wondering why I've decided to give three ordinary children some powerful pokémon and then ask all of you to meet me out here. Well, it's quite simple. Do any of you know what one of these is?" The professor removed a small, flat object from her coat, which was a cross between a lab coat and something out of a Kalosian fashion magazine.

Cheren raised a hand. "A Nintendo DS?"

"Not quite. This item within my hands is a pokédex! One simply has to scan a pokémon with this device and it will reveal all of that pokémon's vital statistics, as well as any data currently known about the species. The thing is, this pokédex is the first of its kind ever to come to Unova, so there isn't much information in it. That is where you three come in!" declared Professor Juniper, somehow managing to include Blake, Bianca and Cheren in one sweep of her gaze. "I have four pokédexes here: one for me, and one for each of you. As pokémon trainers, you will no doubt encounter all manner of pokémon throughout our region, and I would like you to scan each and every one of them, enter any interesting facts you discover into the pokédex, and maybe send me a few specimens."

"WHAT?!" cried Cheren. "You mean you're going to use us as cheap labour?!"

Blake quickly moved in front of him. "I'll be glad to help you, Professor! We'll have those pokédexes filled before you even notice they're gone!" he declared loudly, accepting one of the pokédexes from her hand.

"Me too!" agreed Bianca. "I'm sure it'll be great fun for all three

of us! And a great opportunity for learning life skills, of course." She took two more pokémons, forcing one into Cheren's hand.

"But..." Cheren blustered.

"Not to mention the amount of lives all the stuff we find out about Unovan pokémon could save, and the advances in medical science and pokémonology..." said Blake meaningfully.

Cheren stared fixedly ahead for a few moments, mulling that bit of information over. "In that case, as a gentleman, it is my duty to lead our little party with all the skill and alacrity of a true son of the House of McTavish. Onwards!" he shouted, pointing out into Route 1 with his staff.

"Now?" asked Blake, as Cheren strode boldly forth.

"But of course! Time and pokémon wait for no-one," said Cheren sagely.

"Not even us?!" cried Christobel.

Cheren blushed slightly. "Oh. Well, of course. Mother, Father, I... You're both... I'll send you a postcard."

Blake rolled his eyes, turning back to his own mother. "I love you, Mum, and not just because I want to look better than Cheren," he declared, giving her a hug.

"Oh, Blake... There's no dishonour in doing something just because seeing someone else almost forget to do it reminded you," she said softly. "You're going to have to watch out for that, though. Don't just stay in Cheren's shadow all the time."

"I won't," Blake reassured her. "Goodbye, Mum! Goodbye, Mr Redwood! Goodbye, Professor Juniper! Goodbye, Gerald! Goodbye, Christobel!"

"Goodbye, everyone!" agreed Bianca laconically.

"Try not to get eaten, Bianca!" Mr Redwood advised her.

"What do you mean, you'll send a postcard?! You might not be seeing us for years!" Gerald protested.

"Cheren has a cross-transceiver, doesn't he? Those things can handle video chats," Bianca pointed out.

"Well, yes, but that's beside the point! Cheren, would a hug or something really hurt that much?" Gerald persisted.

"No. Come on, you two. Adventure awaits us, no matter what those two imbeciles say!" shouted Cheren. Ignoring his parents' protests, he took Bianca and Blake by the hand and all but dragged them off along Route 1. "Farewell, Nuvema Town! We will bring honour and glory to you all!"

\* \* \*

><p>"He's off, then," said Christobel matter-of-factly.<p>

"That's our Cheren," agreed Gerald. "A fiesty lad, but a bit..."

"A complete brat?" suggested Blake's mother.

"I heard Bianca call him a snooty-pants," proposed Mr Redwood.

"Don't worry about Cheren," Professor Juniper piped up. "PokÃ©mon change people, and vice versa. And besides, what's the worst Cheren could do?"

"You're right," accepted Mr Redwood. "Anyway, Bianca's with them!"

There was a pause.

"Blake's with them, too," Mr Redwood added.

"Well, that's a weight off my heart..." said Christobel.

## 2. Chapter 2: New Faces Arrive

\*\*~Chapter Two: Whitney and N Arrive, Not Necessarily in that Order~\*\*

Route 1 smelled faintly of the sea, although the dense forest between the route and the beach dampened the effect somewhat. The route was not a very popular route, seeing as how only Nuvema Town was at the far end, so Blake, Bianca and Cheren had it all to themselves.

"Nice day for it, don't you think?" asked Bianca.

"Get of me, you bloody impertinent little-! Er, what? Oh, yes, of course it's- MY CAPE IS NOT A TOY!" shouted Cheren, pulling his slightly tattered cape out of reach of a small, puppy-like pokÃ©mon called a lillipup.

"Don't shout like that! You'll scare it!" said Bianca reproachfully. "Blake, isn't today a lovely day?"

"You're right about that," replied Blake. Blake saw the route with new eyes, or at least had decided to put that in his memoirs if he ever got famous enough to need memoirs. The wild patrats, purrlains, pidoves and lillipups enjoying the sun were no longer just wild pokÃ©mon to be admired from a distance, but potential new allies. And now that he had a pokÃ©dex and an urgent mission, he might as well catch some. He let his hand fall to his belt, from which hung his pokÃ©-balls... his pokÃ©-balls...? His pokÃ©-ball. His single, solitary pokÃ©-ball containing Samantha. His single, solitary pokÃ©-ball which, no matter how sophisticated the technology behind it got, could only hold one pokÃ©mon.

"&%\$Â£ #!" Blake cursed.

"What's wrong?" asked Bianca worriedly.

"We haven't brought any pokÃ©-balls! How are we gonna even scratch

the surface of all the pok  mon in Unova when we can't catch any?!" demanded Blake.

Bianca's eyes widened. "No pok  -balls? But I've got plenty!" she declared, opening her bag to reveal, among all the books, supplies and self-preservation paraphernalia, several pok  -balls. One of them had an orange sticker, probably so she would remember it was Templeton's. "If you haven't got any pok  -balls, I'm sure I could spare a few," Bianca went on, handing Blake some pok  -balls, which he accepted gratefully.

"Altruism wins the day, I see," said Cheren.

"I'm sure you can spare some too, Cheren," Bianca prompted.

"No," replied Cheren. "If I were you, I should look upon this as an opportunity to learn from my mistakes, not sponge off Cheren."

Bianca gave him a dirty look. Blake was about to say something, but Cheren somehow managed to preempt him, gesturing to a patch of tall, lush grass with his walking stick. "That place looks perfect for pok  mon, and now that we've all got a few pok  -balls, we'd better start working on those pok  dexes. Onwards, for the glory of- And just what do you think you're doing?!" Cheren swatted ineffectually at a pidgeot who, as would be expected with her kind's legendary sense of direction, had landed on his hat.

"Let's go," suggested Bianca.

"Let's," agreed Blake.

"If it pleases you," said Cheren grumpily.

\* \* \*

><p>"A fine day's pok  mon gathering, if I do say so myself!" declared Cheren, striding with a spring in his step to meet up with Blake again.<p>

"We've only been at it for twenty minutes," Bianca pointed out, "but you're right. I think I'm gonna call my new pidgeot George."

"George? Templeton sounded a bit like tepig, but George?! You should've called him Patrick, or something," Cheren suggested.

"Duly noted," lied Bianca. "So what are you going to call your lillipup?"

"Nothing," replied Cheren. "I fail to see the point behind naming pok  mon."

"That's a bit snooty-pants-ish..." Bianca pointed out. "Anyway, where's Blake got to?"

\* \* \*

><p>As is generally the case after a scene change like this, Blake's heart was pounding. True, Samantha was doing all the work, but it was almost as if he was there too, a part of her soul.<p>

"Finish him off, Samantha!" Blake ordered, looking triumphant as Samantha clobbered the black-and-purple cat-like pokémon with her detachable shell. The purrlain fell limply to the ground in a faint, giving Blake plenty of time to lob the last of Bianca's poké-balls at him. The poké-ball split open, enveloping the purrlain in a beam of red light. It sucked the purrlain inside and fell to the ground, where it wobbled for a moment, then gave off a cheery little "ding!". Blake attached the poké-ball to his belt, giving Samantha a cheerful grin.

"Three pokémon in one day... who'd've thought it?! See, Samantha? This is what happens when you trust people instead of throwing mud at them!" said Blake.

"Osha oshawott..." sighed Samantha.

Blake noticed she was rather sweaty. "Oh, you're tired. Well, that was quite a lot of battling you did, and against wild pokémon, too. Don't worry, I'll try to avoid any other battles for the rest of the day. But now, let's meet the rest of the team!" Blake tossed his three newly filled poké-balls into the air, releasing a patrat, a lillipup and the purrlain Samantha had only just finished fighting. The three of them stood there for a moment, then as one they collapsed in pain and exhaustion.

"Oh, they still haven't un-fainted... Do you think they'll like me, Samantha?" asked Blake.

Samantha shrugged.

"A good question indeed," said a new voice, a young man's, speaking uncannily fast. Blake jumped, looking around wildly for the source of the voice.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is N," said the voice's owner, emerging from the forest beside the purrlain's former home. He was young and fairly handsome, clothed in white trousers, a white jacket and a white hat, all with black trim. What Blake found most outlandish, however, was his long, spiky green hair. Another purrlain was walking alongside him.

"Uh, pleased to meet you, N. I'm Blake Stormheart, and this is Samantha," said Blake, offering N his hand. Samantha waved at the new arrival.

"Delighted to meet you, Samantha!" said N happily. Ignoring Blake's hand, he squatted down in front of the oshawott and shook her warmly by the paw. "Tell me, is this young man your trainer?"

"Osha," Samantha confirmed. Blake looked on in confusion.

"I see. Do you like him?" asked N.

"Wott osha oshawott wott..." said Samantha neutrally. Blake felt slightly betrayed.

"And does he like you?" continued N.

"Of course I do!" declared Blake.

"Wott wott osha," agreed Samantha.

"Oh, good! So you're sort of friends, then." N fell silent for a moment, surveying the surroundings. "Tell me, Samantha... Those three pokÃ©mon you were ordered to beat up. Are they your friends too?"

"Oshawott oshawott wott oshawott," replied Samantha.

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't know yet... Now, Blake, you're probably wondering what just happened there. You see, I can talk to pokÃ©mon," declared N, rising to his feet.

"Really?!" cried Blake.

"You just saw me and Samantha hold a conversation, did you not?" N reasoned.

"I suppose so... Are you a pokÃ©mon trainer, then?"

N looked almost insulted. "Never! I am a friend to all pokÃ©mon, not one who uses them in competitive sports. To be frank, I find battles barbaric. The only way I could condone the practice is as a means for pokÃ©mon and their... trainers... to understand one another better," he said, saying "trainers" as if it hurt his tongue. "I would not force my dear friend Purrloin, here, to fight any enemy unless she was willing, or it was in self-defence. But enough about me. Tell me, young master Stormheart, what is your philosophy?"

Blake was becoming slightly unnerved by this new arrival, so he decided to play it safe. "I want to be the very best," he said, "like no-one ever was. To catch pokÃ©mon is my real test, to train them is my cause. I will travel across the land, searching far and wide, to understand the power that's inside each pokÃ©mon. Samantha's my best friend in a world we must defend; her heart's so true, our courage is sure to pull us..." N's eyes were glazing over, so Blake took pity on him. "I really love pokÃ©mon, and I want to meet as many of them as I can. I have a mission from Professor Juniper to record every Unovan pokÃ©mon in my pokÃ©dex, so that ties in nicely, and if I end up becoming the world's greatest pokÃ©mon master in the process, so much the better!"

"I see... So you see pokÃ©mon as nothing more than means to an end, is that it?" said N.

"What? No!" cried Blake. "I mean, if... if a pokÃ©mon doesn't want to battle for me, I won't force it to."

"And yet you were willing to have Samantha beat these three poor little dears up, then capture them without so much as a by-your-leave. It's a complicated web of morality, isn't it, when humans and pokÃ©mon come into contact?" asked N.

Blake was getting rather tired of N. "Absolutely not! No, I... PokÃ©mon and humans working together is the best thing ever to happen to either race! Without pokÃ©mon, we'd be... I don't know... bored capitalists? I mean, pokÃ©mon training originated in Japan, and we're the happiest, most prosperous country in the world!" he said righteously, although deep down, he was beginning to wonder about

that.

"Very well, Blake, we'll agree to differ. Anyway, I must be off, so have a little think about what I told you. And if I were you, I'd put those pokémon in their pokéballs. They'll be safer there, given how badly wounded they are..." So saying, N strolled off back through the forest, with Purrloin at his heels.

After a few moments, Blake looked at Samatha. "That was weird..."

Samantha nodded sagely.

"Anyway, we'd best be off," he said, recalling the purrlain, lillipup and patrat into their pokéballs. He looked at the balls for a few moments. Could they actually not have wanted to be captured?...

\* \* \*

><p>"Hi, Blake! I've caught a patrat called George, and Cheren caught a lillipup!" declared Bianca, as soon as Blake was within earshot.<p>

"That's great! I'm sure they'll be glad to meet the three pokémon I caught," Blake responded, doing his best not to look smug. "They're just the usual pokémon from these areas, but I know in my heart, if I love them and believe in them, they can do anything!"

"You may be trying too hard," commented Cheren.

"Well, let's just say something happened... Speaking of which, have you seen a slightly strange boy dressed in white? He had green hair," asked Blake.

"No, but there was a girl asking after just such a fellow. HEY, WHITNEY! COME OVER HERE!" shouted Bianca.

"...What? Who's Whitney?" asked Blake, realising he may have been left out of a crucial part of the conversation.

"She is," replied Bianca, gesturing to a girl about the same age as the three friends, with a very wide, fluffy ponytail on the back of her head. She had green wellington boots, blue jeans (technically plus-fours) and a white sweatshirt, none of which were especially clean, as well as quite a few freckles.

"What is it?" asked Whitney, making her way over to the group, accompanied by a durant.

"Blake, here, seems to have encountered the green-haired man you mentioned to us when we met a few minutes ago. Blake, this is Whitney, a girl we know next to nothing about, other than that she has an interest in boys with green hair," Cheren explained.

Whitney gave Blake an expectant look. "Oh, right. Well, Whitney, he was wearing mostly white, but there was a bit of black on his clothes, too. He had green hair, and he could talk to pokémon... I'm not making this up!"

"I believe you," Whitney assured him. "What was his name?"



"He said he was called N," replied Blake.

Whitney's eyes widened, as did those of the metallic insect pokémon.  
"N?! Which way did he go?!"

"Uh... that way, I think," replied Blake, slightly taken aback by her urgency. He pointed towards where he had found the purrlain.

"Did you hear that, Durant?! He's right over there! Let's go!" cried Whitney, rushing off with her companion to find N.

It was a while before anyone spoke.

"That was odd..." commented Bianca.

"Thank you, Little Miss Stating The Completely Bloody Obvious," said Cheren.

\* \* \*

><p>About half an hour's walking later, the three friends arrived in the small, up-and-coming borough of Accumula Town, optimistically nicknamed the Minas Tirith of Unova. It had originally been built on a large and rather out-of-place hill, but by now the hill had been carved out into three separate tiers. The first tier was mostly parks, although a pokémon centre and a few houses could also be seen. The second tier contained rows upon rows of blocky, three-storey tenements, and the third tier had a few high-class houses. Bianca, who had never been out of Nuvema Town before, looked around in wide-eyed amazement.<p>

"This place is incredible! It's like they decided they couldn't be bothered to get rid of the mountain, so they built the city right on it! Wow!" Bianca cried.

"I'm glad you like this place. Now, we need a plan of action for Professor Juniper's mission. I suggest we-" began Cheren.

"Race you to the pokémon centre!" offered Bianca, rushing off at maximum speed, as she always did when Cheren tried to be in charge.

"Well, taking care of our pokémon is definitely a priority, but-"

"You're on!" said Blake, dashing off after Bianca. What with Cheren's presence, he reasoned, he and Bianca would need to be especially immature from time to time in order to balance things out.

"Well, really!" sniffed Cheren, before striding haughtily off after them.

\* \* \*

><p>The pokémon centre was a warm, bright building, so Bianca and Blake felt at ease as soon as they stepped over the threshold. There were a few people hanging around inside, mostly pokémon and young pokémon trainers, and a cute, chubby, pink-and-yellow pokémon was busy serving glasses of lemonade.<p>

"I've never been inside a pok  mon centre before," Bianca whispered.

"Nor have me and Cheren. This is one area where your sheltered upbringing won't put you at any disadvantage," Blake pointed out.

"Nor have Cheren and I," Cheren corrected Blake, as he materialised in the doorway behind them. "Now, to business! Do either of you know what that pok  mon over there is?"

"I think it might be a Chansey..." replied Blake.

As if on cue, the cuddly pok  mon noticed the three and bustled happily over to them. "Audino! Audi audino no audi!" he orated, pressing a glass of lemonade into Blake's hand, then Bianca's, and finally Cheren's hand.

"I think he might be called Audino," said Bianca.

"Aha! The first uncharted pok  mon of Unova, discovered by yours truly!" declared Cheren, reaching into his pocket for his pok  dex.

Blake gave him a funny look. "Uncharted? It's working in a pok  mon centre!"

"Nevertheless," retorted Cheren, "I'd best enter it into the old pok  dex. Could you stay there for a minute, young fellow?"

"Audino," replied the audino.

Cheren retrieved his pok  dex and scanned the audino for a few seconds. The pok  dex brought up a simple 3D model of the audino, and, in a tinny, synthetic voice, gave the following spiel: "Audino, the hearing pok  mon. It is the kindest, most good-natured pok  mon in Unova. Using the feelers on its ears, it can tell how someone is feeling or when an egg might hatch. Height: 1.1 metres. Weight: 31.0 kilograms. Type: normal. No further data available."

The audino gave the pok  dex a curious look. So did Cheren.

"It's... already... in... the bloody... dex...?!" Cheren's face turned red. "What's Professor Juniper playing at?!"

"You say 'bloody' too much," Bianca commented.

"But, but, but...! She's bloody using us! I mean, somehow... What's even the point?!" Cheren ranted.

Blake sighed. "I'd better take care of the admin. Whatever 'admin' means." He wandered over to the reception desk, dinged the bell, and waited patiently for a few seconds. Cheren and Bianca looked on curiously as a young woman with two long, pink ponytail-loop-thingies at the back of her head emerged from an antechamber somewhere. She wore a veterinarian's uniform, so she was probably a Nurse Joy; a nurse, a mystical healing spirit, a clone, a robot? All people knew about them was that they worked in pok  mon centres.

"Greetings and salutations, o fair veterinarian maiden thingy! I and my companions have been travelling for many a moon, and we and the pokémon who fight beside us are weary and in need of succour. I request a room for myself and my companions, with eight pokémon-sized beds," declared Cheren, barging past Blake.

"Sure thing!" said the Joy perkily. She and her many sisters were used to unusual characters like Cheren, so she took him in her stride. "Could the three of you hand over your occupied poké-balls for a few moments, please?"

Cheren, Bianca and Blake handed the nurse their poké-balls, Blake "accidentally" elbowing Cheren in the process. Cradling them in her arms, Nurse Joy whispered an incantation under her breath. The poké-balls began to glow, as did the Joy's heart, and after a few seconds she handed them back over.

"All done!" said the Joy happily. "Audino, show these three to a room, will you?"

The audino deposited his drinks tray on an empty table and pottered over to the reception desk. He led Blake, Cheren and Bianca up a staircase at the side of the building, down a long, branching corridor and into a reasonably spacious room. There were only two beds, but the presence of a TV, an en-suite bathroom and plenty of books were enough to stave off any complaints.

"Gee, gosh, golly, this is brilliant!" said Bianca happily, flopping down on one of the beds.

"Agreed," said Cheren, smiling faintly. "I wonder if they have a bidet..."

"I think you're forgetting something," said Blake. "Our mission is to seek out new pokémon and new civilisations, to explore strange new regions, and to go boldly where no-one has gone before. Or at least go where no-one's gone with a pokédex before."

"So?" asked Bianca, busily rearranging her pigtails.

"So we'd better meet our new pokémon," replied Blake. "Purrloin, Patrat, Lillipup, Samantha, I choose all four of you!"

Blake's four pokémon burst out of their poké-balls in a slightly subdued manner, seeing as they were indoors. The three newcomers stared around in amazement, not being used to houses. Samantha had only seen the inside of Professor Juniper's place before, but she definitely wasn't going to show that she was disoriented, so she didn't.

Bianca gasped in wonder. "Double gee, gosh, golly! Is that an actual, genuine, honest-to-Arceus purrloin?! I love purrloins! Love them, love them, love them! They're so purry and loiny!"

"Then why didn't you catch one?" Cheren asked.

"Same reason you didn't. George, Templeton, come on out!" requested Bianca, whose repertoire of pokémon-related phrases knew no bounds. Templeton and another patrat emerged from their poké-balls, almost

tearing Bianca's bag open in the process.

"You too, Snivy and Lillipup," said Cheren calmly, aiming his pok  balls at one of the beds. Lillipup and Snivy materialized on the bed, the latter hopping down onto the floor to give Samantha a friendly pat on the back.

"Flying-type pok  mon of a feather stick together, I see," commented Cheren.

"Tepig tep tep," said Templeton sagely.

"My name's Blake Stormheart. I'll be your trainer from now on," declared Blake, offering his hand to his three new pok  mon. The patrat and lillipup both nudged his hand gently with their noses. The purrlain started licking his paws in a slightly haughty manner.

"Now," said Blake, "the three of you are going to need names. How about... Patrick, Lilly, and... Lyoko?"

Patrick, the patrat, nodded to indicate his acceptance.

"Told you!" Cheren said smugly.

"Pup! Lillipup pup!" agreed the lillipup, now to be known as Lilly.

"Well, that was easy. How about you, purrlain? How does Lyoko sound?" asked Blake.

The purrlain sniffed, looking in completely the opposite direction. Samantha made as if to hit him, only to realise that, even if she didn't want the purrlain to dislike Blake, she wasn't exactly prepared to be his champion and most loyal servant just yet.

"All right, then, Lyoko it is!" declared Blake. Lyoko rolled his eyes contemptuously. Blake gave him a moderately disapproving look.

"He's a bit like Samantha, is he not?" commented Cheren.

Samantha raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, I think he's much more like a certain someone with a cape and a hat!" chuckled Bianca.

Cheren shot her a furious look, in the hope that she would wilt under the intensity of his gaze and submit to him. Bianca merely grinned. Cheren sighed and turned away.

"Now then, our foremost duty is to study wild pok  mon. Now that we are all acquainted with each other's pok  mon, we must..."

"Hit the streets?" suggested Blake.

"Buy supplies?" suggested Bianca.

"Oshawott wott?" suggested Samantha.

"All of these in good time," said Cheren. "Come, my eager young

assistants, adventure awaits us!"

Neither Blake nor Bianca could take that "assistants" comment lying down.

"Actually, I'm quite hungry. Fancy a pizza, Bianca?" asked Blake.

"Why not?" replied Bianca, and they made for the nearest pizzeria. Samantha, Snivy, Templeton, George, Lillipup, Lilly, Lyoko and Patrick followed them, chatting merrily amongst themselves. Cheren was too stunned to move.

\* \* \*

><p>"Honestly, you two are the absolute limit!" complained Cheren, as he, Bianca, Blake and their various pok  mon left the pizzeria, feeling full and satisfied. Thanks to the advent of replicator technology, people no longer had to worry about the moral implications of eating meat, so Samantha had been able to gorge herself on a freshly synthesised magikarp. The little oshawott was feeling on top of the world. Bianca had discovered she really loved pineapples, but after eating an enormous mushroom and pineapple calzone all by herself, she was feeling a little under the weather.<p>

"I think I'm gonna pass out..." groaned Bianca.

"Shut up," said Cheren.

"I've been pineappled to death!" wailed Bianca.

"Shut up," repeated Cheren.

"I love you, Cheren. You won't forget that, will you?" said Bianca softly.

Cheren had the decency to look slightly ashamed for telling her to shut up. "Of course not. Now, if I can trust the two of you to go for more than five minutes without finding some new distraction, I shall inform you of our mission: study the pok  mon we have caught while battling, resting and playing in and out of their natural environments. We will also probably need to locate a pidove, but that can wait a while. Any questions?" asked Cheren.

"Yes. Who died and left you in charge?" asked Blake.

"Me, if I don't get some indigestion tablets soon!" complained Bianca. "Oh, wait a minute..." She reached into her bag, rummaged around for a moment and removed a packet of indigestion medicine.

"There's something to be said for having an overprotective father, I suppose," commented Bianca, as she retrieved a tablet from the packet and swallowed it.

"Better?" asked Cheren.

"Yep," replied Bianca.

"'Yep' is not a word!" snapped Cheren. "Anyway, we'd better... what in the...?!" Cheren, Blake, Bianca and the pokÃ©mon drew to a sudden halt. At the base of the steps to the second terrace, where they were, a large crowd had gathered in front of three helicopters. Blake could just make out the sound of a female voice coming from a megaphone on one of the helicopters:

"Greetings, citizens of Accumula Town! We are the PokÃ©mon Liberation And Separatism Movement Agency Foundation, but you may call us the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation for short. Heed our words, and be prepared to change your lives and the lives of all Unovan pokÃ©mon forever, or you will face immediate execution!"

Another voice cut in: "What are you talking about?! We're here to talk some sense into people, not kill them!"

"That's N!" gasped Blake.

Cheren gave him a sideways look. "That fellow with green hair? Here, now, in one of those helicopters?"

"All right, all right, keep your hair on... P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, prepare to disembark peacefully!" ordered the original amplified voice.

"I hope this isn't a sign of bad things to come..." commented Bianca.

"Hold it right there, you P.L.A.S.M.A idiots!" roared Whitney, leaping from out of nowhere to land in front of the three Nuvema Town children. After a moment's fevered arm-whirling to avoid tumbling down the stairs, Whitney waved to Blake and slid off down the middle banister, followed by Durant.

"It is!" groaned Bianca.

"YOU HEAR ME, N?!" shouted Whitney, her voice dwindling as she slid further down, "I WANT THAT MONEY YOU OWE ME, AND I WANT IT NOW!"

### 3. Chapter 3: Striaton City and PLASMA

\*\*~Chapter Three: Five Go to Striaton City (After Other Things Happen)~\*\*

A hatch opened in the belly of the largest helicopter, releasing a rope ladder. From their vantage point on the stairs, it was hard for Blake, Cheren or Bianca to make out any details of what was going on, but they could tell that a man dressed in a cloak and an unusual diadem with a built-in eyepiece was climbing carefully down. Once he was out of the way, a woman dropped nimbly to the ground beside him, seemingly contemptuous of how painful falling can be. She had tan skin and wavy blue hair, and a massive sword was strapped to her back. She wore green bloomers, a red tank top, purple combat boots and an orange bandana.

The man removed a tripod from the folds of his cloak, placing it under the helicopter, and the unseen people within lowered down a large megaphone. An honour guard of uniformed people in black, white

and grey armour (or possibly raincoats) was forming around the two. Whitney had given up elbowing her way through the crowd, instead lifting Durant up so he could get a better view.

"I'm not sure I like what I'm seeing..." whispered Cheren.

"Nor do I, but they're too far away to hear us, so why bother whispering?" Bianca reasoned.

Cheren gave her a look. "Can't you at least try to get into the spirit?"

The brightly-dressed woman with the sword stepped up to the megaphone. She glared at the crowd around her, silently daring them to raise any objections, then spoke.

"Testing, one two, one two... Can you hear me at the back?"

The crowd, by and large, confirmed that they could hear her.

"Good. My name is Melissa, Grand Marshal of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, and this is Ghetsis, leader of the Seven Sages. I am here representing the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. Today, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to talk to you about pok  mon liberation," declared the woman.

That got the crowd muttering amongst themselves like never before.

"I'm sure most of you believe that we humans and pok  mon are partners that have come to live together because we want and need each other. This is a blatant lie. Pok  mon are little more than slaves. From the moment they're born until they die in battle, covered in blood and tears and crying for their mummies, their lives are dominated by the selfish commands of trainers. They get pushed around when they are our "partners" at work, given separate drinking fountains, forbidden from public office... Can anyone say with confidence that there is no truth in my words?" continued Melissa.

"There's NO truth!" said someone confidently.

"You crazy idiot!" shouted a member of the crowd.

"Get her off!" shouted another.

"What was that?!" snarled Melissa, unsheathing her sword, which was almost as long as she was. And she was five foot ten. The crowd rapidly fell silent.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, pok  mon are different from humans, but in no way inferior. They are living beings of vast and unknown potential, living beings with hopes and dreams, living beings from whom we humans have much to learn. And the only way we can do right by them is to set them free. As long as pok  mon are subjugated, the world will be devoid of justice. I ask you, in the name of all the pok  mon of the world, get rid of pok  mon trainers. Destroy the gyms and the so-called pok  mon centres. Smash the pok  mon league to pieces and make the Elite Four tidy up the rubble with their hands tied behind their backs, while their former slaves drink lemonade on

the beach. Then, and only then, will pokémon be free. If any of you here are pokémon trainers, I implore you to reconsider your life. The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will rehome your pokémon in the wild, where they belong. Will anyone come forth?" Melissa fell silent, waiting for a response.

The crowd redoubled their hubbub. For a moment it looked as if a few pokémon trainers were going to renounce their vocations, but nobody actually did.

"Nobody?" Melissa's face hardened into a mask of rage. "Then none of you will see your next dawn. Warriors of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, prepare to--"

Ghetsis tapped her on the shoulder and whispered urgently into her ear. Melissa turned back to the crowd, looking calmer, but by no means chastened. "Er... Thank you for your time, people of Accumula Town. I hope you will consider my words, you selfish, cruel, heartless, loathsome, evil... sorry, it's my blood pressure. Um, goodbye."

Melissa stowed her sword in the sheath at her back, retrieved the megaphone and climbed back into the helicopter, looking slightly embarrassed. Ghetsis followed her, mouthing an apology at the crowd as the hatch closed. Once all the P.L.A.S.M.A personnel had embarked, the helicopters did a neat about turn and flew off in a southwesterly direction, passing over Blake, Bianca and Cheren as they did so. There was little doubt, however, that they would be back.

\* \* \*

><p>Cheren was utterly bewildered. "What was that all about?" he enquired.<p>

"No idea," replied Blake, "although the phrase "pokémon liberation" is probably key."

"The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation believes pokémon will have better lives if humans leave them alone, and they were trying to drum up some support. At least, that's what I took from that," said Bianca.

Cheren stared. "You... you just said something sensible!"

"So what? I say sensible things all the time!" Bianca pointed out.

"Anyway," said Cheren, realising he was losing the initiative, "pokémon liberation and the moral implications thereof. Discuss."

"Er..." said Bianca.

"Um, well, pokémon can think, feel..." said Blake. "I suppose we do have to treat them like people."

"Which makes sense, because they are people. I support the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation with all my heart. You should too, if you have even half the moral fibre I do," said N. Bianca and Blake jumped. Cheren almost fainted.



"N! What...?! I mean, how...?! You were on one of those helicopters!" cried Blake.

"Was I?" asked N innocently.

"I'm pretty sure you were," Blake persisted.

"So you're N, are you?" asked Cheren, rallying magnificently.

"I am," replied N.

"He is," confirmed Blake.

"Pleased to meet you, N! I'm Bianca," declared Bianca, offering N her hand. N ignored it magnificently, turning to gaze dramatically out over the stairs, attracting some curious looks from passers by.

"I am N Harmonia, son of [DATA REDACTED], who was himself a descendent of the ancient heroine Jenny, or at least one of the many female police officers copying her style. I am guardian of all pokÃ©mon. I may or may not have been aboard a P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation helicopter, and I may or may not be an ally of the Foundation, but right now, it is safe for you to know that I believe wholeheartedly in their philosophy. All pokÃ©mon are my friends, and I will not suffer any ill-treatment towards them. Any questions?" asked N.

"Yes. What sort of a name is Data Redacted?" asked Bianca.

N blinked. "No, that's not my father's name. You don't need to know his name at present, so I redacted it. Any questions that are actually relevant?"

"Do you believe in women's rights?" asked Bianca.

"Um, yes. Any other questions?" asked N.

"Have you ever been to any other regions?" asked Bianca.

"No..." said N, who was beginning to get the feeling Bianca was a couple of gym badges short of an oppressive human supremacist regime.

"Do you like splashing in puddles?" asked Bianca.

N stared at her. "I don't know!"

"You should try it. It's the most fun anyone can have while getting really wet at the same time!" declared Bianca. "I like making mud pies, too, but they don't taste very good. Do you like pie, N? Personally, I like-"

"Bianca, shut up," commanded Cheren. "Just shut up, all right?! Shut up! Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!"

"Only for you," said Bianca, shutting reluctantly up.

"Anyway. N, do you actually think humans and pokÃ©mon should be forced to be completely separate?" asked Blake. A plan was forming in

his mind, a rather hasty plan which might, nevertheless, reveal some information N would rather keep under wraps.

"Of course not!" replied N. "I simply believe pok  mon need to be treated as equals."

"Well, that's not what the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation seems to want," Blake pointed out. "They want complete separation."

"What?!" N thought for a moment. "I think I'll have to have a little chat with Melissa next time we go bowling..."

"Aha! So you ARE in league with the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation!" said Blake triumphantly.

"Er... no comment," replied N.

"But you know Melissa?" Blake persisted.

"No comment," repeated N.

"I've only been a pok  mon trainer for about a day, N, but I'm more than a thousand percent certain humans and pok  mon benefit from working together. Now, you can go ahead and ramble on about pok  mon liberation, but be warned: if you, Melissa, Ghetsis, or any of your pals try anything, Blake, Bianca and Cheren will be there to stop you! Okay?!" shouted Blake. He waited for a moment to see how N would react to his speech, only to discover that N was lying dazed on the ground while Cheren and Bianca tried to pull an angry, metallic, insectoid pok  mon off him.

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm sorry, young lady, I don't believe we've had the pleasure," said N, who was slightly nervous of the angry, bushy-haired girl in front of him.<p>

"You know damn well we've had the pleasure, you odious twonk. I'm Whitney Blazeheart. You know, that girl you cheated out of a bet three months ago?!" snapped Whitney, looming threateningly over N, or at least trying to. He was quite tall. "And don't call me "young lady". You're just as young as I am, and I wouldn't be a lady if one sat on me. Uh, so to speak."

"...I'm twenty-three," said N. "You don't look a day over fifteen."

"Not the point!" snapped Whitney.

"Look, I genuinely have no idea what you're talking about. Is there any chance you could stop being angry for a moment and enlighten me?" said N, adopting a reasonable, non-aggravating tone.

"Fine! Three months ago, you made a bet: that Durant would be more happy living alone in the wild than with me. I don't know how you talked him... us into it, but we went our separate ways." All the anger had drained from Whitney's voice. "I spent the first night sick with worry, and the second day catching up on my sleep. The second night, I still couldn't sleep, 'cause I'd been sleeping all day." Now the anger was back, with reinforcements. "And on the third day, he

came crawling back to my door... well, my sleeping bag, anyway, covered in mud and rust and almost dead. You put Durant through all that for nothing more than your own twisted ideals. Now, I don't want your money, but I do want to punish you, so GIVE ME THE MONEY!"

N had had about all he could take. "You \_forced\_ Durant out, you stupid girl. He wanted to stay!"

"Thereby proving you wrong!" said Whitney triumphantly.

"Uh..." N stopped short. "I... you... you're still not getting any money. Partially because I don't have any on me, this being a socialist utopia..."

"Whatever." Whitney thought for a moment. "I don't suppose you've got your ancient coin collection with you?"

"Oh, actually, I might..." said N, reaching into his pocket. He retrieved a few ancient Greek drachmae, still shiny and golden despite their many years buried underground, and gave them to Whitney.

Whitney had never had such large, shiny gold coins before, so even a single drachma would have satisfied her. "This is... they're so beautiful! Thank you so much, N! I mean... it's about time, you fathead!" she declared, although her heart wasn't really in it.

Whitney crouched down beside Durant, letting him admire the coins. "We did it, Durant. Vengeance is served!"

Durant gave her a meaningful look.

"I suppose we'll give these to charity," Whitney proposed. "Or, um..."

"I'll be off, then," N interrupted. When later interviewed about the event, Blake, Cheren, Whitney and Bianca all swore they saw him simply disappear.

Cheren cleared his throat. "You're finished with him, then, young la-"

Whitney rounded on Cheren, silently daring him to finish that sentence.

"Young woman? Homegurl? Mate? Your highness? Me old mucker?" offered Cheren, completely failing to be intimidated.

"Just call me Whitney," she sighed.

"What will you do now, Whitney?" asked Blake. He was beginning to feel a connection to this mysterious girl, possibly because her name was so much like his.

"I have no idea. Me, Durant and my other pokÃ©mon have been tracking N for so long now, it's become all we ever cared about. Now that I've got all these beautiful coins, our lives have no real purpose any more..." replied Whitney. "What are the three of you doing?"

"We are on a quest of national importance, to categorise every pok mon in all of Unova!" declared Cheren.

"And probably do gym battles as well," Bianca added.

"And keep an eye on the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. I'd rather not go back on that speech I made to N," Blake add-added. "Much as I'd like to. I mean, we're not exactly the greatest warriors who ever lived..." he add-add-added sourly.

"Really? In that case, I'll come with you," said Whitney.

"I beg your pardon? You can't just waltz up and declare yourself one of our number, young l- Whitney. There is a lengthy application process, and you will need-" began Cheren.

"Then that settles it. Welcome to the team, Whitney!" declared Blake, giving her a friendly pat on the back. Cheren raised his eyes heavenwards.

"You'd really let me come with you just to annoy that lad with the cape and the silly hat?!" cried Whitney.

"There's nothing we wouldn't do to annoy Cheren, Whitney. That's how much we care!" replied Bianca, ruffling Cheren's hair. He sighed.

\* \* \*

><p>After deciding their first day as pok mon trainers had been a resounding success (even though absolutely nothing of interest happened after Whitney joined them), Blake, Cheren and Bianca faced the difficult task of making room for Whitney. At night, she rolled around like nothing else, almost pushing Bianca onto the floor, and Cheren's feet were so cold Blake was awake half the night. Durant snored like nobody's business. But such was the joy of being young and free that the following morning, all of them felt refreshed and cheerful, and the day's pok dex-filling exploits went as smoothly as ever they would. The pok mon around Accumula Town were fairly common, so many of the townsfolk had interesting facts and anecdotes about them, and by the end of day four, there wasn't even the slightest reason left for them to remain.<p>

"Are we all packed?" Cheren asked, as the four waited at the northern exit from Accumula Town for Cheren to decide they could leave, based on a lengthy and complicated series of criteria which only he knew. The northern exit opened out onto route 2, which led to Striaton City.

"Probably. I have my sleeping bag, knife, book about safe usage of knives, toothbrush, art collection; Bianca's got her survival books, Blake has his wok, camping stove and tea set... I mean really, what kind of idiot travels with a tea set and a wok?!" replied Whitney.

"The three-time winner of the Nuvema Town Juniour Cookery Competition?" Blake offered. His mother was generally busy with her duties as a samurai and his father hadn't been in Nuvema Town for years, so Blake was pretty much self-sufficient when it came to cookery.

"Well, yes..." Whitney conceded.

"Good. Now, Whitney, you don't have a pok dex. Call me overly picknickety, but I cannot help but think your lack of pok dex makes you less than ideal for our mission," Cheren pointed out.

"What about a book full of beautiful, hand-drawn pok mon pictures and strategical observations gathered over many long years of living in the wilderness and a few months of hunting N?" said Whitney proudly.

"Oh. That'll do nicely. Blake, do we have a packed lunch?" asked Cheren.

"We do," replied Blake. "We've got cheese sandwiches, mushroom sandwiches, berries, apples, pok mon food and crisps."

"What, no lashings of ginger beer?" commented Bianca.

"That's settled, then! Now, does everybody have pok balls?" asked Blake, who learned from his mistakes.

"Naturally," replied Cheren.

"Of course!" said Bianca.

"Um... Wait here, will you?" asked Whitney, and she rushed off to the nearest pok mon trainer supplies shop.

"I'm back!" Whitney declared a few minutes later, her arms laden with pok balls, spray-on healing potions and status healers.

Blake stared at her. "How many pok -balls is that?!"

"About thirty," replied Whitney.

"All that stuff must've cost a fortune!" commented Bianca.

"It was very reasonable, actually. Just one drachma!" said Whitnet breezily.

Blake raised an eyebrow. "And the rest are for charity?"

"If I may," said Cheren, in a manner which suggested he didn't really care whether or not he may, "people are beginning to stare at us. We should probably go before people start asking questions."

"All right, then. Lead on, o glorious leader. We will follow you into the very jaws of the Distortion Realm," said Blake sarcastically.

\* \* \*

><p>Cheren was not planning to lead them into the jaws of the Distortion Realm just yet, but the wild pok mon on route 2 were much rowdier than on route 1, so before long his cape was in tatters.<p>

"I mean, really! That was a genuine imitation faux-leather Johtoian all-weather cape, worn by some of the most stylish people in history, and now look at it!" ranted Cheren.

"You should try coating it in plastic," suggested Bianca.

"That's a brilliant idea, Bianca, with just one minor drawback: there isn't really enough left of my cape to coat," Cheren pointed out.

"Oh," said Bianca. Then her eyes brightened. "Hey, look, it's another purrlain! I'm going to catch it! Don't try and stop me, anyone!"

"No-one's going to try and stop you, Bianca," Blake pointed out.

"Except possibly the purrlain," Whitney added.

"That's good to know," said Bianca. "Templeton, on stage!"

Templeton emerged from his pok  -ball with a flash of light, looking as calm and serene as always. "Tep?" he asked.

"Hey, purrlain! Do you mind if me and Templeton capture you?" asked Bianca.

"Purrlain purr loin purr..." said the purrlain snidely, indicating that while Bianca was welcome to try to capture her, success would be unlikely.

"Use flamethrower!" commanded Bianca. Templeton tilted his head to one side.

"Oh, you don't know how... All right, then, use fire spin!" ordered Bianca. Templeton sighed.

"Overheat? Heat crash? Flame charge? Fire punch? Blast burn? Fire blast? Incinerate? Sacred fire? Ember?" said Bianca hopefully.

"Tep!" said Templeton happily, and he sent an ember screaming towards the purrlain.

"Loiiin!" wailed the purrlain, as the ember singed her dark purple fur. She rushed at Templeton, slamming into his side and knocking the wind out of him. Templeton, by no means defeated, tackled the purrlain as hard as he could, which knocked her out.

"Thank you, Templeton," said Bianca, withdrawing a pok  -ball from her bag. "Purrlain, you've just been purloined! Well, not exactly purloined, more sort of... drafted? Um..."

"Just throw the pok  -ball," suggested Whitney.

"All right," said Bianca, tossing the pok  -ball at the purrlain. She was sucked inside, and the pok  -ball closed with a decisive click.

"Yippee!" squealed Bianca. "I've got a purrlain! I've got a purrlain! I've got a purrlain! I'm so happy to have my own beautiful little purrlain! Oh, happy day!" Bianca jumped for joy, watched curiously by Templeton.

"Assuming, of course, that the purrlain decides of her own free will to stay with you," Cheren pointed out.

"Let her have her moment, Cheren," said Blake warningly.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I happen to view pok  mon as more than collector's items!" said Cheren self-righteously. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to capture a pidove for our research. Blake, you'd better see if you can find-"

"An audino!" declared Blake. "I've heard some of them can be found around here, so that's what I'll be looking for."

Cheren glared at him. "What I was going to say was-"

"There's one!" cried Whitney, tapping Blake on the shoulder and pointing to an audino, who was busy sunning himself near a briar patch.

"Thank you," said Blake, making his way to the audino.

"You most certainly are not welcome!" shouted Cheren, who was beginning to lose it.

"Yes he is!" protested Bianca.

\* \* \*

><p>Blake cleared his throat to attract the audino's attention, readying two pok  -balls: one empty, and one with Samantha in it.<p>

"Audi? Audino!" said the audino brightly. He rushed over and gave Blake a hug, almost squashing the wind out of him. Blake's eyes widened. He'd never met this particular audino before, so why would it be so friendly?

"Audino? Audi no no audi audino?" asked the audino, gesturing to the pok  -balls Blake was holding. He released Samantha, who was promptly cuddled.

"Osha?! Oshawott wott!" Samantha protested, before realising the audino couldn't possibly mean her any harm, whereupon she cuddled him as high as her knee-high oshawott body could reach. Blake couldn't help but smile.

"Audino, do you mind coming with me? You know, in a pok  -ball?" asked Blake.

"Audino," replied the audino, and he nudged Blake's proffered pok  -ball with his snout. The ball sucked him inside in short order.

"Nice work, Samantha! You took that cuddle like a true warrior!" Blake joked. "Do you know any good names for an audino? How about Darkblade?" asked Blake.

"Wott?!" cried Samantha.

"Unless you prefer something like Cuddles or Fluffykins..." said Blake.

"Osha!" wailed Samantha, sticking her tongue out in disgust.

"Darkblade it is, then!" declared Blake. Samantha said nothing, merely remote-activating her poké-ball to get out of the conversation.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ahhh... This is more like it," sighed Whitney. She was completely content for the first time in months, perched amid the branches of a tall, blossoming beech tree. No more N to chase, no more guilt over not convincing Durant to stay; just her, her friends, and the wilderness. It was true: Wilderness were Paradise enow. There were trees to climb, mud to squelch in, pokémon to meet; if she ever felt like drawing or writing poetry, there'd be something to inspire her. Frankly, the wilderness spoiled her rotten, and no-one in their right mind would have it any other way.<p>

Brimming with glee, Whitney slid down from her arboreal perch. "It's a magical world, Durant, old buddy. Let's go exploring!"

\* \* \*

><p>Their forces swollen like never before, Blake, Whitney, Bianca and Cheren made their way to Striaton City. Route 2 was not the longest of routes, but the walk took four hours, by which time nobody would have objected to a bath and a hot cup of tea.<p>

"Cheren's log, Monday the thirteenth of April: After many long hours of walking, we have arrived at last at the gates of Striaton City, home to the powerful triplet gym leaders Cilan, Chili and Cress, and their slightly out-of-place sister and occasional partner, Chloe. To the west of this city are Nacrene City and Pinwheel Forest, home to a wide variety of pokémon, all of which we will study in good time. My party are weary and footsore, but we must press on for-"

"Cheren, what are you drivelling on about?" asked Blake.

"Nothing!" said Cheren, momentarily flustered.

"We wouldn't happen to be making an imaginary diary of our adventures, would we?" asked Bianca sweetly.

"No! All I am doing, my dear friends, is, um, well, all things considered... uh... Look! There's Professor Juniper!" cried Cheren, relief flooding across his face.

"Who?" asked Whitney.

"Unova's preeminent pokémon researcher," replied Cheren. "It is for her that our noble crusade takes place. Greetings and well met, Professor Juniper! We have many tales of our journey, and plenty of new findings regarding the countless fantasmagorical pokémon of our fair region!"

"I know," Professor Juniper pointed out as she made her way over to



the four. "Me, Fennel and Amanita have been working on the pokÃ©dex servers all day."

"Oh," said Cheren. "Wait, who are-"

"And who is this?" asked Professor Juniper, gesturing to Whitney.

"I'm Whitney Blazeheart, and this is my partner Durant," Whitney informed her. "I am an artist, poet, writer, pokÃ©mon trainer, strategist, explorer, complete hoyden and free spirit." She shook Professor Juniper's hand.

"Delighted to meet you, Whitney! Now, if I may ask, why are you with these three fine young researchers?" asked Professor Juniper.

"Fine young researchers? What are we, six-year-olds?" muttered Cheren. "And while we're on the subject, who are Fennel and-"

"It's fairly complicated, Professor, but suffice it to say, she didn't have any purpose in life until we invited her along," said Blake.

"Invited?!" cried Cheren. "Talking of which, Fennel and Amanita... Can you tell me who-"

"Do shut up, Cheren, there's a good chap," said Bianca, in a perfect impersonation of Cheren's most pompous voice.

"Well, it's good to see you're rubbing along together as nicely as always! Now, why don't the four of you-"

"Five," Whitney interrupted. "Me, Durant, Blake, Cheren and Bianca."

Professor Juniper blinked. "Very well. Why don't the five of you come and have a spot of tea, possibly involving biscuits as well? I have much to discuss with you."

"I'd love to!" said Bianca cheerily.

"Yes, please," said Blake.

"Why not?" said Whitney.

"But of course. A true gentleman leaves no cup of tea unconsumed," said Cheren sagely. "And knows when to give up. I'll meet Fennel and Amanita when the time comes, I suppose..."

\* \* \*

><p>Professor Juniper led them to a rather messy flat with a view of the wide plaza in front of Striaton City's pokÃ©mon centre, school and finest restaurant. Blake and Bianca stared in amazement at the large computer banks dotted around the living room and kitchen, while Cheren and Whitney tried to look as if this was all perfectly normal. The promised tea and biscuits were nowhere to be seen, but the two women waiting beside the coffee table were interesting enough on their own.<p>

"Fennel, Amanita, these are the children I told you about, plus one other and a durant who seem to have come out of nowhere. Cheren, Blake, Bianca, Whitney, Durant, these are my colleagues, Fennel and Amanita," declared Professor Juniper. Amanita was a tall, broad person with curly black hair, wearing a very high-waisted pair of trousers and a polo shirt, while Fennel wore a lab coat even more impractically fashionable than Professor Juniper's.

"Put it there, whoever-you-are!" said Amanita loudly, giving Cheren a vigorous hand-shake.

"Unk! D-delighted to meet you, madam, and may I say what a delight it is to meet one with such an outgoing manner as yourself!" said Cheren, surreptitiously checking to see if his hand still worked.

"Um, hello," said Fennel shyly, somehow managing to hide behind her glasses and an incandescent blush.

"By Jove, it does my heart a power of good to see people like you! Hardly any children nowadays care about science at all. They think scientists are all awkward, unconfident people with oversized nerd glasses and spots! I mean, really!" laughed Amanita. Fennel looked about ready to burst into tears.

"Anyway, how are those pokÃ©dexes coming along?" asked Professor Juniper, once Fennel had calmed down.

"Quite well," replied Blake.

"Indeed," agreed Cheren, "and Whitney has a collection of art and hand-written observations somewhere about her person, although it's hard to tell where, what with modern bag technology and suchlike."

"Well, be sure to keep up the good work. While we're on the subject, are you planning on challenging this city's pokÃ©mon gym?" asked Professor Juniper.

"Naturally," replied Cheren.

"I've already done it, actually," said Whitney, looking just a little bit smug.

"Jolly good! You should probably make sure all your pokÃ©mon have some experience of battling, though. I'd recommend you practice in the Dreamyard, over to the east of this city," suggested Professor Juniper.

"See if you can pick up some dream mist for us while you're at it," Amanita requested.

"Dream mist?" repeated Bianca.

"It's, um, produced by the pokÃ©mon who live in the Dreamyard?" said Fennel.

"Then that's settled!" said Cheren loudly, rising dramatically to his feet. "We'll help these fair blooms, or my name's not Cheren McTavish, gentleman adventurer! Onwards, to the Dreamyard!"

"To the pok  mon centre, then a nice park bench to eat our packed lunch, then the Dreamyard!" shouted Bianca.

"Yeah!" agreed Whitney.

"To the pok  mon centre!" agreed Blake.

"Why do I bother?..." sighed Cheren.

#### 4. Chapter 4: A Triple Gym Battle

**\*\*~Chapter Four: A Triple Gym Battle Followed by a Serving of Action and Intrigue~\*\***

"Cheren, we don't actually know what dream mist looks like, do we?" Blake pointed out.

Cheren paused mid-stride. "Good point, but we've lost more than enough time already, thanks mostly to Bianca."

"What?! All I did was eat five apples!" protested Bianca. "In any case, I think I'm beginning to develop an immunity to tummy aches."

"The vast majority of those apples were meant for us," Cheren pointed out. "We'll just have to see if we can spot some dream mist on the hop. Professor Juniper and her compatriots are relying on us, so we must... oh, good grief."

"What? What is it?!" demanded Blake, Bianca and Whitney.

"See for yourself," sighed Cheren, gesturing to a tall, wide, spiky tree growing right in the middle of the path into the Dreamyard. Old, run-down buildings claimed by vines and moss could be seen beyond, but a sign hung from the tree, bearing the message "Dreamyard closed by order of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. Trespassers will be set upon by our pok  mon and shown no mercy."

"That's outrageous!" declared Blake.

"I know! Who are they to tell us where we can and can't go?!" demanded Whitney.

"No, I mean, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation believe in pok  mon liberation, so why would they have pok  mon to fight off trespassers?" Blake reasoned.

"That's a good question. Either the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation are immensely hypocritical, or the aforementioned pok  mon are fully-fledged P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation agents with all the privileges thereof," said Cheren. "Personally, I think they're hypocrites."

Blake considered this. Melissa had seemed fervently anti-pok  mon training, Ghetsis seemed like a fairly nice fellow, and as for N, the very word "trainer" disgusted him. On the other hand, fanatical types like them could justify almost anything.

"Anyway, we can't simply wait here all day. We'll face the Striaton Gym, then deal with the dream mist as and when we can," suggested Cheren.

"Good idea," agreed Bianca.

\* \* \*

><p>"Striaton City Restaurant and PokÃ©mon Gym - A Triple Serving of Combat or Cuisine," read Cheren, gazing up at the luxurious doorway of the gym, above which hung a large sign embossed with gold letters. "This is definitely the right place."<p>

As the group made their way through the door, Blake felt a rising sense of trepidation. They hadn't had the opportunity to train at the Dreamyard yet, so what if all his pokÃ©mon weren't up to the challenge of facing a gym leader? What if he wasn't? What if Cheren and Bianca weren't either?! Blake took a deep breath, reminding himself how pointless it was to get too wrapped up in fear to actually do anything. Gym battles were a learning opportunity as well as a way of proving oneself. It wasn't the winning but the taking part that counted. He was still a beginner. Failure was only "failure" if you didn't learn anything from it. None of that stuff really reassured him.

The gym/restaurant's entryway opened out into a wide, spacious room full of elegant tables, at which sat a wide variety of people and pokÃ©mon, eating an even wider variety of food. At the back of the room was a very wide pair of curtains, dyed in a swirl of green, blue and red.

"Cilan, Chili and Cress specialise in grass, fire and water-type pokÃ©mon, and you can challenge them behind the curtain," said Whitney quietly. "They also have a sister who specialises in electric-type pokÃ©mon, but she doesn't come here very often."

"That's very interesting. Do come along," said Cheren, leading the way around the tables and assorted gourmards to the curtain, attracting a few odd looks from the newer patrons. "I know about the gym leaders' sister, by the way. She's called Chloe. Now..." Cheren surveyed the curtain. "Do you know what we do now, Whitney?"

"Ring the bell?" suggested Blake, pointing to a stylish silver bell hanging from the roof. He could just about reach the bell-pull, but Whitney stayed his hand.

"No, you go through the curtain and, if no-one's there, ring the bell on the other side," she said. "I know it's a rather counterintuitive way of doing things, but there you are..."

Whitney drew back a bit of the curtain, revealing a sleek, modern-looking kitchen. Three young men were busy preparing some food, one with spiky red hair, one with short green hair, and one with well-combed blue hair.

The man with green hair looked up from the steak (replicated, of course) he was preparing. "Can the four of you wait a moment? We're a little busy, and- oh, it's you, Whitney! Can you and your friends wait a moment?"

"Of course, Cilan. We've got plenty of time," replied Whitney. "That was Cilan, the grass-type specialist," she explained to her less experienced chums. "The other two are Chili and Cress, the fire and water-type specialists."

"You're on a first-name basis with a gym leader?!" cried Bianca.

"Well, yes..." said Whitney noncommittally.

"Cilan, Chili and Cress. I see," said Cheren.

"Three of them, and three of us who haven't been to this gym before. That makes one each!" declared Blake, trying to seem confident.

"WHAT?!" cried the redheaded gym leader, Chili. "ONE EACH?! Do you realise how conceited that makes you seem?! I ought'ta throw you out with a burnt bottom for that!"

"S-sorry!" said Blake, somewhat taken aback.

"And so you should be, you ugly little twerp! My brothers and I are the best of the bunch, and don't get me started on Chloe! You don't stand a chance, you buncha' filthy, black-hearted-"

"That's enough, Chili," said Cilan calmly.

Chili rounded on him. "HOW DARE YOU TELL ME WHAT TO DO?! We're equal partners, you grumpig-headed little plonker! Besides, I'm the fire-type gym leader around here, so I have a type advantage over your miserable excuses for pokÃ©mon!"

"In that case, please explain to our guests how I managed to defeat you every single time you challenged me," Cilan invited his brother.

Chili turned bright red. "Y-you promised not to tell anyone!"

"As I recall, you promised not to shout at our guests unless we all agreed they deserved it," Cilan pointed out. Chili scowled. Blake, Bianca and Cheren looked on in amazement.

"I'm sorry about that," Cress piped up. "Now, I take it the three of you children who aren't Whitney have come to challenge us?"

"Correct," Cheren confirmed.

"That's right!" Bianca confirmed.

"We have," Blake confirmed.

"Then by Ho-oh, we'll blast you to blazes!" declared Chili.

"After we've given our customers their meals," Cilan pointed out, picking up a plate of sirloin steak marinated in olive wine, garnished with okra and mange tout, and with plenty of chips. "Actually, I don't suppose the four of you fancy helping out?"

"More free labour, after what he said to us?" sniffed Cheren. "I'd rather eat a-

"We'd be glad to!" declared Bianca.

"But..." said Cheren.

"I'm sure waiting on tables can't be that hard. I mean, they don't expect us to do it all day..." Blake reasoned.

**\*\*Several hours later:\*\***

"Just once, Bianca? Can you not, just once, let me finish what I'm saying when I'm saying something important?" pleaded Cheren, as the four of them made their weary way back to the kitchen.

"I just did," Bianca pointed out.

"Other than that, I mean!" snapped Cheren.

"I could try..." offered Bianca.

Cilan, Chili and Cress were waiting for them in the kitchen. After a long day of serving meals, they knew their challengers would be feeling rather exploited, so they had thrown in a voucher for a free meal.

"You're ready for your gym battles, I take it?" asked Cress.

"That's right," confirmed Cheren, restraining himself from making a comment about how long a wait they'd had.

"In that case, we shall have a triple battle. That means Blake, Cheren and Bianca battle me, Chili and Cress at the same time," declared Cilan.

Blake looked at Cheren. "I've never heard of this triple battle business before..."

"Nor I. It's probably quite a new invention," Cheren suggested.

"Come. The arena is this way," said Cilan. He led them through a nondescript door beside the oven, down a long corridor and out into a wide, fenced-off area behind the building. Tall, bushy trees and shrubs surrounded the arena, giving the impression of a lush garden, but there was no disguising the fact that a lot of pok mon battles had taken place.

"Challengers, take your places at the far end of the battlefield," commanded Cilan. "My brothers and I await your performance with great interest. Whitney, you can wait on that bench over there."

"Are you two ready?" asked Cheren, as he, Blake and Bianca took their places.

"Yep," replied Bianca.

"I think so," replied Blake.

"In that case, let's hop to it. Each competitor will use one poké-mon, so make sure you have a strong connection with it! Ready your poké-balls!" shouted Cilan.

Blake reached for Samantha's poké-ball, noticing Cheren and Bianca choosing their own poké-mon. The colour-coded triplets each took a poké-ball from the folds of their waiter's uniforms and threw them into the centre of the battlefield.

"Pansear, hit the floor! Get ready to unleash the invincible power of fire!" shouted Chili, as a small, red, monkey-like poké-mon with a cream-coloured face and paws emerged from his poké-ball.

"You'll show them what for, won't you, Panpour?" asked Cress, as a similar blue monkey poké-mon emerged from her ball.

"Pansage, I choose you!" declared Cilan, as a green monkey-shaped poké-mon emerged from his poké-ball.

"Samantha, give them a taste of your... oshawottiness!" shouted Blake, throwing Samantha's poké-ball onto the field. The oshawott posed dramatically in the ball's afterglow, knowing in her heart that this was what she was born to do.

"Oshawottiness? Really?" whispered Cheren. He cleared his throat. "Snivy, I choose you!" Snivy emerged, looking thrilled at the prospect of beating up some enemies.

"Bianca calls... Templeton!" declared Bianca, spinning dramatically on her leg before releasing Templeton. The tepig looked around curiously for a moment, then settled down for a nap. Bianca gave a deep, heartfelt sigh.

"Samantha, use water gun!" commanded Blake. Samantha's eyes darted between the three monkey poké-mon as she tried to work out which one to attack, then a long, tubular vine smacked into her head, knocking her onto the ground. Cilan's pansage readied his claws to finish Samantha off, and it suddenly occurred to Blake that perhaps giving up on the Dreamyard so soon wasn't a very good idea. He was dimly aware of Snivy fighting expertly against Cress's panpour while Templeton and the pansear spewed flames across the battlefield, but he needed to pull his weight as well, or pull Samantha's, or get Samantha to pull his weight. The pansage had a type advantage over her, so...

"Get up and tackle him!" Blake ordered. Narrowly avoiding a flurry of fury swipes, Samantha leapt to her feet and barreled into the pansage. Then she pulled the cream-coloured shell off her belly, parrying an incoming vine whip with expert timing.

Blake's eyes widened, then he grinned triumphantly. "That's the way to do it! Show that leaf-monkey who's boss!"

"Oshawott wott osha osha!" agreed Samantha.

"Pansage, tie her up!" ordered Cilan. His pansage sent forth his vines once more, wrapping around Samantha's limbs and leaving her trussed up like an unfezant.

"Osha! Oshawott oshawott!" protested Samantha.

"Pansage, pansage pan!" retorted the pansage, tightening his vines.

Blake turned pale. "Hang in there, Samantha! It's just a few painfully tight vines!" One more grass-type attack would probably finish Samantha off, and there was little she or he could do about it. On the other hand, this battle wasn't just about Samantha...

"Since you're there, use water gun on the pansear!" ordered Blake. Samantha looked at him like he was completely bananas, then noticed the pansear chasing Snivy across her field of vision, and before the pansage could do anything, she fired off a spout of finest quality water.

"Seeeear!" the pansear wailed, as Samantha's water gun threw her over to the far side of the arena, where she crashed into the wall and promptly fainted.

Chili stared in horror at his vanquished pok  mon. "Pansear! I mean, how...?! You cheated! You must have!" he declared, pointing an accusing finger at Blake.

Blake ignored him. "Well done, Samantha! Now, um..." Samantha was barely conscious thanks to the pansage's vines, so carrying on the fight was probably out of the question. "You might as well lie back and think about nice stuff."

"Osha oshawott..." said Samantha, giving Blake a heavy look.

"Finish her off, Pansage!" commanded Cilan, and with a look of triumph, his pansage squeezed Samantha like a tube of toothpaste. She fainted, eliciting a pang of guilt in Blake. The pansage danced in triumph, only to be summarily knocked out by an ember from Templeton.

The three elemental monkey pok  mon had fainted, so Blake, Bianca and Cheren were the winners. Relief and elation flooded over Blake as the knowledge began to sink in: he had won his first gym badge, and so had Cheren and Bianca.

"Hooray! We did it!" rejoiced Bianca, voicing Blake's innermost thoughts. "Me and Templeton: totally wicked crusaders of awesomeness! That's pretty much what we are. And George and Purrloin, of course. Mustn't forget them."

"That was a piece of cake," said Cheren, unable to keep himself from grinning.

"WHAAAAT?!" cried Chili.

"Snivy sni!" agreed Snivy, running over to Cheren, who gave her a smile as he withdrew her.

"Are you all right, Samantha?" asked Blake worriedly, as he retrieved his oshawott. Being unconscious, she couldn't reply, but Blake got the impression she appreciated his concern.



Cilan cleared his throat. "Congratulations, challengers. It is not often all three of us are defeated in the same day, and this is the first time it happened all at once! Cress will present you with your badges in a moment, but first, I have a few words of advice for you."

"Why's it always him who gets to do this?" muttered Chili. "I mean, I'm a perfectly good orator, I've got a loud, carrying voice, I've got lots of things to say..."

"Shut up, Chili!" said Cress.

"You, in the glasses, hat and rather tatty cape, your style of battling is methodical and highly strategic. This wouldn't necessarily be best for your snivy, and yet you seem to have adapted yourself to her quite well. Keep up the good work," said Cilan.

"I'm glad we're in agreement," said Cheren.

"You, the girl with the blonde hair, you seem to lack experience, but you make up for that with enthusiasm. You'll have to work on your tepig's sleepiness, though. I recommend you read up on pok  mon and get plenty of practice," Cilan continued.

"Thank you, sir," said Bianca politely. She would have to start reading her father's books at some point, she knew, but there were only so many hours in the day...

"And you, in the hat so reminiscent of a surprisingly famous boy from Pallet Town, the main criticism I have is that you tend to freeze up in mid-battle. Your oshawott is used to a fast and furious style of battling, so unless you begin to think fast, you may find it hard to form a deep and lasting connection with her. However, you definitely have talent and enthusiasm, so I believe you will be able to make something of yourself," Cilan finished.

"I... I see. Thank you," said Blake. Freeze up? Him? Well, Cilan probably had a point, but how did he know about this from just one battle?

"And now," said Cress, "here are your badges. The badge of Striaton Gym is known as the Trio Badge, after the triumvirate of gym leaders who you can challenge in order to obtain one. With this badge, young and inexperienced pok  mon will be impressed enough to follow you without question, but you should probably not push your luck."

Cress held out three badges, composed of a red jewel, a green jewel and a blue jewel surrounded by gold. (It was probably just plastic, but it looked nice.) Bianca, Blake and Cheren each took one, attaching it to their person with reverent care. Well, Cheren did; Bianca managed to cut herself with the pointy bit, and Blake, who wasn't used to badges, had to be helped by Whitney.

\* \* \*

><p>"You three are simply unbelievable!" declared Whitney, as she, Blake, Cheren and Bianca left the gym. She didn't know whether to be impressed or worried. "I mean, most pok  mon trainers have to practice for days before a gym battle, and you won just like that..."<p>

"All thanks to my magnificent leadership, no doubt," said Cheren. Blake couldn't tell if he was being serious, but the look Whitney gave him suggested she believed he was.

"Do you think the Dreamyard's open to the public again?" asked Bianca.

"Could be," replied Blake.

"We had better visit it again in any case. Professor Juniper and her polar opposite colleagues are relying on us for dream mist, and who knows? There might be some unusual pokémon there," said Cheren.

The four companions made their way to the Dreamyard, where, to their chagrin, the spiky tree was still in place. Also there were Fennel, Amanita and Professor Juniper, looking extremely annoyed.

"Ah, gentlemen! I see you've-" began Cheren.

"What?!" cried Amanita.

Cheren blinked. "Ah, ladies! I see you've discovered the impasse preventing us from delivering you your dream mist. Please rest assured that I have my team working on it as we speak."

Whitney gave Cheren a look, as did Blake.

"If you have any ideas for getting past the tree, we'll gladly hear them. I don't really trust the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation," said Professor Juniper.

"Er, well..." began Cheren.

"Climb over it?" suggested Bianca.

"With those spikes?!" said Amanita incredulously.

"Go past it via all those other, non-spiky trees either side of the path?" proposed Whitney. The path was lined by tall, dense trees, but it would be easy enough to get under them without even having to go near the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's barrier tree.

Professor Juniper, Fennel and Amanita stared at Whitney, then burst into peals of laughter.

"Hahahahahahaha! Oh, that's a good one! Go... go off the path? Through the trees?! That's patently ridiculous!" was the general consensus.

"But... why not?" Whitney insisted.

"It is not the done thing, Whitney," Cheren informed her. "A civilised person doesn't go through the trees unless lives are in danger."

"Me and Durant've been doing it for years!" Whitney pointed out.

"Really?!" cried Blake, scarcely believing his ears.

"I know for a fact it isn't against the law, so why shouldn't we simply take the easy, practical way of bypassing the barrier bush?!" demanded Whitney. "I mean, it's not as if we're in a video game, and the trees are some kind of invisible barrier to make sure we don't stray from the plot!"

"Because it's... I'm not doing it!" Professor Juniper declared, looking disgusted by the very prospect.

"If any of you idiot children want to go crawling about in the undergrowth, be my guest, but leave me out of-" began Amanita.

"TAKE THIS, YOU FILTHY POK  MON! I WANT THAT DREAM MIST, AND I WANT IT NOW!" shouted a loud, angry voice, coming from inside the Dreamyard. There was a pregnant pause, punctuated by wails of fear and pain.

"...On second thoughts, the only way society can be advanced is by pushing back boundaries and trying new things. Come on!" cried Professor Juniper, setting off through the trees.

\* \* \*

><p>"What do we do now, Aurea?" asked Amanita, as the group made their way into the Dreamyard. "Attack, right? Catch 'em with their trousers down!"<p>

"Or their skirts," said Bianca. "Or tights, shorts, jumpsuits, leg-warmers-"

"OBVIOUSLY, we look for whoever's doing unspeakable things to a defenceless pok  mon," interrupted Professor Juniper, wincing at the mention of her ridiculous first name. "Bianca, Cheren, Blake, Whitney, no-one's obliging you to come with us. Whatever happens within this Dreamyard may be both dangerous and disturbing, so you and your pok  mon could be in danger. Do you understand?"

"Of course we're staying! An innocent pok  mon is being caused untold suffering as we speak, and as pok  mon trainers, it is our duty to do whatever we can to defend it," Cheren replied, before anyone else could speak.

"I never doubted you for a second!" said Professor Juniper gladly. "Now, we just need to find-"

A round, pink pok  mon with four very small limbs floated past, wailing in terror. Three people in P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation uniforms rushed out after it, brandishing a variety of long, heavy sticks.

"Get back here, you miserable excuse for a pok  mon! We need dream mist for the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's top-secret and highly immoral scientific experiments, and you're going to give it to us whether you like it or not!" shouted one of the group, a man with red hair.

Bianca gasped in horror. "Did you hear that?!"

"Yes," replied Cheren. "I daresay everyone in the Dreamyard heard it,

in fact."

The three P.L.A.S.M.A agents skidded to a halt. "No! You didn't hear that, all right?! No-one heard that!" shouted the red-haired man.

"What in the name of Arceus do you think you're doing, beating up an innocent munna to get dream mist?!" demanded Professor Juniper. "I mean, it's one thing just to ask nicely, but what you're doing is quite another!"

"Er..." said the red-haired man nervously.

"Who sent you to do this?!" demanded Whitney. "Was it Melissa or N? If so, I doubt they're going to be best pleased..."

"Absolutely not!" replied the red-haired man. "We are under orders from none other than-"

"Don't tell them, you dummy!" snapped one of the other P.L.A.S.M.A agents, a woman who had customised her armour/raincoat to include extra pockets for useful things.

"Oh, right, sorry," said the red-haired man, looking slightly sheepish. "Anyway, who are you lot to tell us what we can do?!"

"I'm Professor Juniper, this is Amanita, and these are Cheren, Blake, Bianca and Whitney," replied Professor Juniper. "As for what right we have to impede you, I shan't dignify that with a response." She reached into her pocket, retrieving a pok  mon-ball. "Minccino, I choose you! Show these three the meaning of righteousness!"

With a flash of light, a small, grey pok  mon with large ears and a cute little nose emerged from the pok  mon-ball. With a cry of "Ccino! Minccino ccino mincci!", he sized up the three P.L.A.S.M.A agents, each well-built and over six feet tall and holding a big stick. He turned pale.

"Need a wingwoman, Minccino?" offered Amanita, stepping forwards. She cracked her knuckles in a very meaningful way.

"There are still more of us than you!" snapped the redheaded P.L.A.S.M.A agent.

"Not for long," declared Whitney, taking position beside the two scientists. Durant gave Minccino an encouraging look, prompting the little grey pok  mon to hide behind him.

"Ah, a fair fight, only we've all got big sticks!" said the redheaded agent happily.

"Guess again, my good sir," said Cheren calmly. He tossed his lillipup's pok  mon-ball out onto the ground, releasing the small, brown puppy-like pok  mon. "Pup! Pup lilli lillipup!" she said enthusiastically.

"Can't we just shut up and start clobbering each other?!" demanded the P.L.A.S.M.A agent with plenty of pockets.

"Suit yourself," said Amanita.

With a synchronised battle-cry of "PLASMA!", the three P.L.A.S.M.A agents rushed at their enemies. Professor Juniper and Amanita stepped nonchalantly aside, allowing Durant, Lillipup, Minccino and Whitney to assail their enemies. Blake stared on in amazement, wishing more than ever before that he'd kept going with his fencing and martial arts lessons as Cheren stepped into the fray, scoring several glancing blows with his staff and one vicious finishing strike.

"Owww! P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, prepare to retreat- aaaaaaargh!" wailed the red-haired man.

"That's the spirit, Durant! Bite his bum!" said Whitney enthusiastically.

"RUN!" shouted the woman with plenty of pockets.

With speed and skill born of a two-week training course in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's secret base, the three agents made a run for it. They had not got far when a pink light enveloped them and they floated helplessly into the air.

"What the gibbing flump?!" cried Bianca, staring on in amazement as the P.L.A.S.M.A agents flailed about with little effect.

"That's a powerful psychic attack," said Professor Juniper. "But that munna wouldn't've been powerful enough..."

"Maybe it's a more powerful munna," suggested Blake.

As if on cue, a large pokémon floated into view. It was round and pink, much like the munna, but with a purple dorsal section and a longer nose and paws. Pink mist flowed out of its head, swirling around in midair before evaporating.

"It's a musharna!" said Professor Juniper, seemingly in awe.

"It must've come to avenge that munna," reasoned Bianca.

"We'd better make a record of this," declared Cheren, getting out his pokédex.

With a look of intense concentration, the musharna slammed the P.L.A.S.M.A agents together several times, then dropped them unceremoniously to the ground. "Sharna!" she said triumphantly, before heading off to look for the munna.

"That's quite a pokémon," commented Blake.

"I know, and can you believe there isn't anything about it in the pokédex?!" cried Cheren, busily typing in a vivid description of a musharna's psychic powers.

"Are you ready to surrender, then?" asked Amanita, making her way over to the hapless P.L.A.S.M.A operatives.

"Never!" shouted the red-haired man, leaping to his feet.

"I very much think you should put some thought into your situation,

young fellow-me-lad," said Amanita, snatching the bludgeon from his hand and snapping it in half.

The red-haired agent stared at the two halves of his weapon, then at Amanita, then at his feet. "Fine, we give in..." he mumbled.

"We'd better get you to the police station, then," said Amanita matter-of-factly. "Come on, Aurea, Minccino and whoever wants to watch!" So saying, she frogmarched the three P.L.A.S.M.A agents back out of the Dreamyard, followed by Professor Juniper, Whitney, Cheren, Bianca and the pok  mon. Blake was about to follow when, in the corner of his eye, he noticed a fluffy pink substance on the ground where the musharna had been.

"Is that...?" Blake muttered, kneeling beside the pink stuff. It felt suspiciously like candyfloss, but not nearly as sticky. Was this dream mist? Blake wasn't sure, but as he ran after his friends, mentor and acquaintance, he was sure he saw the musharna waving at him... which was rich, considering he hadn't really done anything, but it wasn't as if he was going to take the dream mist for himself.

## 5. Chapter 5: Route 3, Etcetera

\*\*~Chapter Five: Route 3: Foreshadowing, Backstory and Rain Abound~\*\*

"Cheren's log, Thursday the sixteenth of April: We have recorded a great deal of information regarding the pok  mon inhabiting the Dreamyard, and I have finally managed to capture a pidove. Bianca has captured a munna, whom she has insisted on naming Claribelle, while Blake and Whitney's teams of pok  mon remain static. On the subject of Whitney, her pok  mon remain a mystery even now. I know only of Durant."

"Cheren, you're going to have to keep an eye on that. Making imaginary diaries of your adventures is never a good sign, brain-wise," said Blake, leaning smirkily against the wall.

Cheren stiffened, then stood on his dignity. "I would not expect you to understand, Blake; my intellect is such that anything I say to myself is forever recorded, so my logs will remain safe until such time as I can write them down," said Cheren.

"Okay, then. What was your log entry from Monday?" asked Blake.

"Um..." said Cheren.

"Are you two ready?!" called Whitney, from afar.

"Of course we are! You can blame Blake for sidetracking us!" said Cheren loudly, making his way out of the alley before Blake could protest. When Blake caught up with him, it was to see Whitney carefully polishing Durant while Bianca listened intently to her cross-transceiver.

"...I see," said Bianca. "Okay. We'll be sure to check it out. Love you! 'Bye!" Bianca deposited the cross-transceiver in her bag, then

turned to Blake and Cheren (Whitney was below eye level). "That was Daddy. He says there's a shop in Nacrene City that sells indestructible helmets disguised as stylish hats, and he'll write me out of his will if I don't get one."

"Ah, jolly good," said Cheren. He knew Mr Redwood's threats were good-natured, albeit scarily accurate. "Now, today we away ere break of day for Nacrene Ci-TAY, far to the west of Striaton. There is a pokÃ©mon gym there which doubles as a library and museum, courtesy of the gym leader's love for archaeology and reading, although the museum part is mostly run by her husband. To reach Nacrene City, we shall take Route 3, accesible via-

"Cheren, we know all this!" snapped Whitney, having long since finished polishing Durant.

"I... I \_merely\_ thought a brief reminder would keep our minds in gear during the long and dangerous journey ahead," said Cheren testily.

"He's always doing this," Blake whispered to Whitney, as they made their way to the gardens west of Striaton City. "Cheren knows lots of stuff, and he thinks everyone needs to hear it. Me and Bianca used to spend hours trying to find anything he didn't know, and when we succeeded...!"

"But we love him anyway," Bianca butted in.

"Glad to hear it," said Cheren. "By the way, be on the lookout for blitzles. They're just under a metre tall, with black fur, white stripes and a mane shaped like a bolt of lightning-

"We \_know\_," said Blake heavily.

Whitney retrieved a mildly-smudged pencil drawing of a blitzle from somewhere about her person. "I drew this in Nimbasa City when I first challenged Elesa. She won hands-down, but I got this drawing out of it."

Cheren was deathly silent.

"I met a wild blitzle, too, but he zapped my pogo stick. We don't really get on," Whitney continued.

"Ah, here we are: Route 3, the road to Nacrene City!" said Cheren loudly. "Come on, people, no time to waste! We must away at once! Full steam ahead, and no yakking about blitzles!"

\* \* \*

><p>Route 3 was fairly standard as routes went: a wide, grassy path surrounded by trees, beginning at the north end of the Striaton City gardens. I feel I need not go into too much detail on the gardens lest I bore the smeg out of you, but suffice it to say they were very pretty. As the four companions-<p>

"Five!" said Whitney, gesturing to the now sparkling clean Durant.

Oh, sorry. As the \_five\_ companions set out from Striaton City, waved

off by a few passers-by with nothing better to do, a light rain began to fall. Cheren sighed, pulling what little remained of his cape around his shoulders. Blake quickly put his hood on, then realised he already had a hat and took it off again. Whitney jumped for joy at the thought of all the mud being made, Durant gave silent thanks for long-lasting polish, and Bianca ran about trying to catch raindrops on her tongue. She had almost managed to catch one when she tripped over a pokémon lying in the grass and landed in an enormous muddy puddle.

As Bianca lay there, lamenting her fate, her father's words of wisdom entered her mind: "Now, Bianca, I must insist that you get as dirty as possible while on your journey. It boosts the immune system. But don't get stuck in the mud or go anywhere near a nuclear power station, all right?"

After a few moments, she got up from the puddle and turned around to see the long, angry face of a pokémon glaring down at her. The pokémon was a head higher than Bianca, and a jaggedy white mohawk-mane-thingy ran all the way down to her sparking tail, complete with twin thunderbolt-shaped horns on her head. Bianca gulped.

"Um, sorry I tripped over you," said Bianca. "Are... are you a blitzle?"

"No," replied the pokémon. Bianca screamed, then muffled herself as best she could until the scream subsided in order to avoid damaging anyone's ears.

"You... you... you can talk!" gasped Bianca, once she was sure no more screaming was forthcoming.

"I can indeed," replied the pokémon. "In answer to your question, no, I am not a blitzle. I am a zebstrika, and my name is Zephyr, Daughter of the Storm. What is yours?"

"I'm Bianca, Daughter of Mr Redwood. Pleased to meet you, Zephyr!" said Bianca, reasoning that the best way to deal with difficult situations was to meet them with her usual cheer and joie de vivre.

"Charmed, I'm sure. Now... Do you by any chance know of the Heroes of Truth and Ideals?" asked Zephyr.

"Um... nope," replied Bianca.

"I see. Do you then know of a dark young man with a heart of thunder, or a bright young woman with a heart of fire?" asked Zephyr. "Or a dark young woman with a heart of thunder, and so on."

"Well, I don't know any black people personally. It's not that I'm racist, it's just... you know... we're in Japan, and we've never had much immigration in my hometown. You'd have more luck in Mozambique, probably. As for the bright young woman with a heart of fire... er... I'm fairly bright, but my heart only pumps blood," replied Bianca.

Zephyr was put slightly off her stride by Bianca's speech on racial demographics, but rallied magnificently. "Ah. Well, do you know



anyone called, for example, Blaine Thunderheart or Winona Flareheart? Something along those lines?" she asked.

"I do, actually," replied Bianca. "They're called Blake and Whitney."

"Blake and Whitney... Perfect!" said Zephyr happily. A look of triumph crossed her face. At long last, her search might be complete! "They'd be mighty warriors, skilled in the arts of battle, both by hand and with pokÃ©mon? Veterans of a thousand noble crusades and quests? Sworn to defend the world from evil?"

"Not exactly... We're on a mission to find out stuff about every pokÃ©mon in Unova, but we're also doing gym battles and whatnot on an unofficial basis," replied Bianca.

"Oh," said Zephyr. "Well, I'll come back in a few weeks and see how things are progressing." So saying, she reared up, her mane flashing yellow with lightning, and zoomed off so fast Bianca was bowled off her feet. After a moment, she heard a faint sonic boom off in the distance.

Bianca pondered the recent revelations for a moment, then shrugged, turning back to see Blake, Cheren, Whitney and Durant finally catching up with her. "Hey, you three! I mean four!" called Bianca, rushing over. "There was this zebstrika and she was looking for some people called Blaine and Winona only they turned out to be Whitney and Blake and she thought you were both really tough but I told her you weren't, no offence, and she ran off!"

Whitney, Blake and Cheren stared at her.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait... Why are you covered in mud, and since when could zebstrikas talk?" asked Whitney.

"It's complicated," replied Bianca.

"Well, can you run that past us again?" asked Blake.

"Okey-dokey," said Bianca. "There was a zebstrika called Zephyr, and she told me she was looking for a white girl and a black boy, or possibly the other way round, and I told her she'd have more luck with racial diversity somewhere else, but it turned out she was really interested in Winona and Blaine!"

"Aren't they gym leaders from other regions?" asked Cheren.

Bianca blinked. "Oh, sorry, I meant Blake and Whitney."

"And since when was any part of Japan racist?" asked Blake, a sudden sense of patriotism welling up in his heart.

"Since never, but there aren't any black people for miles around," replied Bianca. "Seriously, it's ridiculous. In a multicultural, twenty-first century game franchise, a few people of colour most certainly are not too much to ask. Or gay people, for that matter, and some non-standard gender identities."

"Uh... "game franchise"? What are you talking about?" asked Cheren.

Bianca shifted nervously. "Uh... nothing, nothing at all! I'm just being my usual silly self. No enhanced awareness of the nature of reality here! No siree!"

Cheren gave her a withering look.

"Well, it doesn't look like any blitzles are going to show up any time soon," said Blake. "And now that you mention it, the next gym leader's West Indian, isn't she?"

"I believe so," said Cheren. "In any case, we'd better-"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a second time! Hold it! What was that about this Zephyr person being interested in me and young master Stormheart?" asked Whitney.

"No idea," replied Bianca. "She thought you were warriors of some sort, but when I told her we were just a bunch of teenagers on a quest to become brilliant pokémon trainers and find out lots of stuff about every pokémon in Unova, she ran off."

"I see," said Blake. Well, this was rather unexpected. A zebstrika who could talk, looking for him and Whitney? Could this have anything to do with the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation?

"Bianca, I think we're missing the real issue here: why are you all wet and muddy?" asked Cheren.

"I tripped over Zephyr. That's how I met her," replied Bianca.

"Oh, right," said Cheren. "Now, I don't know about you, but I'd rather not stand in the rain for too long. Nacrene City awaits us, as do all its warm, waterproof buildings, so I feel we needn't worry too much about Zeph-"

"Hold it!" said a loud, imperious voice, signaling the arrival of two small children in the traditional attire of dungarees and weird round hats. Blake looked at Cheren, who looked at Bianca, who looked at Whitney, who looked at Blake, who was fairly nonplussed to see two six-year-olds blocking his path.

"Do you two need our help or something?" asked Blake.

"As if!" scoffed the younger of the two children, a girl with politoed-shaped wellington boots. "My brother and I are the most powerful pokémon trainers in the world, and we will not suffer you to pass unless you can defeat us."

"Oh, how adorably precocious!" cried Bianca.

"Shut it, magikarp-for-brains!" snapped the other child, a boy with a plentitude of freckles. Bianca's face fell.

"Now, see here!" said Cheren, who had no qualms about taking a firm line with young children. "I am Cheren, son of Christobel and Gerald, firstborn of the House of McTavish, and guardian of the sacred kingdom of Nuvema, and I will not suffer you not suffering my group to pass! Stand aside at once!"

"Shan't," said the girl obstinately.

"...Very well, then. I shall accept your silly little challenge, since we seem to have no choice," Cheren sighed.

The boy, who hated being patronised, picked up a handful of mud and threw it at Cheren, knocking his hat off. Cheren gasped, kneeling down to check whether his hat was all right. "You're going to pay for that, you rascal!" said Cheren furiously, replacing the hat on his head and adjusting the feather until it was just right. "I shall crush whatever pathetic excuses for pokémon you have the nerve to-"

Whitney grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him to a safe distance, still ranting and raving, with a little help from Durant. "You two had better deal with the little ones. I don't know if I can protect them from Cheren and tell my pokémon what to do at the same time."

"All right," said Blake, adopting a fiercely determined pre-battle stance. "Bianca and I have decided to accept your challenge in lieu of Cheren, who is a little bit busy right at the moment." He reached for a poké-ball, deciding on the pokémon least likely to scare the children. "Darkblade, I choose you!"

"Audino! Audino no audi!" declared Darkblade, as he emerged from his pokéball.

"George, stand by for battle!" shouted Bianca, throwing George the patratt's poké-ball to the ground beside Darkblade. George materialised beside Darkblade, smartly saluting Bianca before adopting a battle-ready stance.

The two young children looked into each other's eyes, then nodded in the most dramatic way they could before retrieving a poké-ball each from their pockets.

"Go, Woobat!" declared the girl, releasing a round, light blue pokémon with a large nose and two fairly small wings.

"Woouoooooobat!" the pokémon trilled, fluttering happily in midair.

"That's a new one," commented Bianca, rummaging for her pokédex.

"Munna, I choose you!" said the boy loudly, releasing a munna from his poké-ball.

"Pika! Pikachu!" said the munna, who liked to be different.

Blake examined the pokémon for a moment. He knew Darkblade lacked physical attack power, so his attacks (pound, doubleslap and last resort) wouldn't be much use, but he could also use helping hand, which would be good for George's more powerful attacks.

"Darkblade, use helping hand," Blake commanded. Darkblade nodded, then gave George a warm, loving embrace, giving the patratt a little extra strength for his next attack.

"What a brilliant idea!" commented Bianca. "George, use bite on one of those enemy pok  mon!"

George politely but firmly pushed Darkblade aside and rushed at the munna.

"Quick, use psybeam!" shouted the boy, and his munna hastened to obey, sending a stream of psychic energy at George. George leapt aside, only to take a vicious assurance attack from the woobat which would surely have finished him off if the psybeam had hit. George bit the munna square on the nose, and she screamed with pain as the dark power of biting someone overwhelmed her psychic powers.

"Well done, George!" said Bianca triumphantly. "Now quick, tackle that woobat!"

"Oh, no you don't!" shouted the boy. "Munna, give it another psybeam!"

"Pika!" acknowledged the munna, readying a psybeam. George gulped.

"You use psybeam too, Woobat! Unless you can't, in which case use gust!" ordered the girl.

"Bat woobat!" said the woobat determinedly. The two pok  mon sent a blast of psychic energy and a ferocious gust of wind at George, who was beginning to feel his number was up.

"Intercept them, Darkblade!" ordered Blake. Darkblade rushed into the gust and psybeam's path, managing to deflect a little of their energy with a doubleslap before he was bowled off his feet. The munna and woobat celebrated, but it was short-lived, as George smacked head-first into the munna. This time, she fainted.

"Oh, no! Munna!" wailed the boy.

"Don't worry. Woobat's more than powerful enough to win this fight!" the girl reassured him. "You hear that, Woobat?! Use confusion!"

"How about another helping-hand-bite combo?" Bianca whispered to Blake.

"Okey-dokey," replied Blake. "Use helping hand again!"

"Then you use bite, George!" Bianca elaborated.

Darkblade, being somewhat pressed for time, limited himself to kissing George on the cheek. George then leapt at the woobat, baring his fangs. With a cry of "Woooooobat!", the fluffy blue bat pok  mon sent a wave of highly confusing psychic energy at George, but he smashed through unharmed and bit the woobat's wing. He wailed in pain, then slapped George with his other wing, sending the patrol tumbling across the ground. He was by no means out for the count, though.

"All right, a quick tackle should do for the woobat. Go for it, George!" ordered Bianca.

"Back him up with pound!" commanded Blake.

"Audino!" shouted Darkblade, as he charged towards the woobat.

"Patrat rat!" agreed George, and he charged as well.

"Bat! Woobat!" wailed the woobat, realising his end was near, at least temporarily.

"Don't give up, Woobat! You can surv-" began the girl, but she was unable to finish, due to her beloved woobat being thrown onto her face by the impact. She cradled the woobat in her arms, looking decidedly miserable. "But... but why?" the girl said softly, looking up to face her companion. "We were the greatest, brother! No-one else could even hope to defeat us!"

"It could be because you're both six years old and you've only ever challenged relatively unskilled pok  mon trainers," said a new voice, belonging to a kindly woman with a large umbrella.

"Oh, shut it, you miserable old bat!" snapped the young boy.

The kindly woman gave him a dirty look. "Okay, why don't the two of you get back to the nursery and dry off while I have a little chat with these two?" she suggested.

"Very well," sniffed the boy. "Return, Munna," he added, recalling his munna into her pok  ball.

"Oh, Woobat, will we never see your like again?!" wailed the girl, as the two headed off along the rather wet route.

"I'm sorry about those two," said the kindly woman, after she'd made sure they went in the right direction. "They seem to have got it into their heads that they're brilliant pok  mon trainers, and they keep harassing anyone who tries to use route 3."

"That's quite all right," Blake assured her.

"Anyway, I'm Marion, from the preschool a few minutes' walk back along the route. If you want somewhere to wait for the rain to stop, and possibly have a bath, you can join us," offered the woman.

"Thank you for your generous offer," said Cheren, arriving with Whitney beside her, "but my friends and I are warriors, proud and independent. We must complete our quest to-"

"I'd love to come!" declared Bianca.

"So would I," agreed Blake.

"But-" began Cheren.

"I've always believed in the kindness of strangers!" Whitney interrupted him. "Thank you very much, Marion."

\* \* \*

><p>"Spill the beans, you miserable brat!" A rough, heavy hand struck the boy's forehead, sending a stabbing pain through his noggin.<p>

"I-I don't know!" wailed the boy.

"TELL US WHERE UNOVA'S BIGGEST POPULATION CENTRE IS!" shouted the thug, making as if to break the boy's arm.

"I don't know! I'm only seven!" screamed the boy, tears streaming down his rather dirty cheeks.

It was fifteen years ago. During a similar rainy day on this very route, a young, green-haired boy was in serious trouble.

"All right..." growled the thug. "Ariana! Tickle his feet until he squawks."

The second thug, a woman clad in the same black uniform as the first, threw the boy down on the muddy grass and set about unceremoniously removing his shoes.

"Please!" wailed the boy. "I'm just a little kid! I don't know anything!"

"I know," sneered Ariana. She reached into her pocket and retrieved a blood-stained feather duster, emblazoned with the bright red R of Team Rocket. "But here's the thing: we're evil. And desperate. Really desperate, as evil teams go, but still." Roughly, she grabbed the boy's right ankle and started tickling his foot without mercy. Helpless with mirth, the boy thrashed wildly around, almost kicking the first thug's nose in the process, until after five minutes which seemed like years, Ariana finally released the boy's ankle.

"I don't believe it. He's too strong!" she raged. "We'll have to break out the big guns."

The boy gulped. Big guns didn't sound especially good for him, unless perhaps he was the one firing them, but there was no way he could get away. He would just have to hope Arceus was feeling generous...

"Excuse me," said a female voice with a strange, inhuman quality that made it need to be italicised.

"Y-yes?" said the boy quietly.

"Are you, by any chance, in need of assistance?" asked the voice.

The boy took a look past his shoulder, then almost screamed. There, talking to him, was a purrlain!

"C-can you help me?" asked the boy, hardly daring to believe what was happening.

"I probably can," replied the purrlain, and baring her fangs, she leapt at Ariana.

"Aaaaaargh! Get off me!" wailed Ariana, batting the purrlain aside.  
"Archer, get it off me!"

"Purrlain! Loin purr purrlain!" snapped the purrlain, which the boy heard as "\_Shut your face, you miserable old bat!\_"

"Bloody pokÃ©mon, always trying to do good deeds..." sighed the male thug, Archer. "Then again, they're not without their uses. Geodude, get that cat!" He threw a pokÃ©-ball at the purrlain, releasing a pokÃ©mon the boy had never seen before. It looked like a small, round boulder with two eyes, a scowling mouth and a pair of muscular arms.

"Geodude! Geo!" declared the pokÃ©mon.

"Get that purrlain!" ordered Archer.

"And you, Zubat!" agreed Ariana, releasing a second pokÃ©mon. This one was a purple, bat-like creature, with no eyes but a very large mouth, from which protruded four sharp fangs. The boy watched on in horror as the purrlain battled with the thugs' pokÃ©mon, only to be thrown roughly aside like a sack of mouldy beetroots. The enemy pokÃ©mon had been so savage, they hadn't even given her time to faint and start recovering from her injuries. He started to cry.

"Now then, my young friend," said Ariana evilly, "how'd you like some salt rubbed into your wounds?"

The boy watched in horror as she retrieved a salt shaker from her other pocket. "Um, begging your pardon, miss, I don't have any wounds."

"We'll soon see about that," declared Ariana. "Zubat, time for dinner!"

The boy shut his eyes, praying for a quick end. The zubat licked her lips, eyeing up all his tastiest parts, readying some venom to give him a little extra-

"Take this, you black-hearted cretin!" shouted a loud, angry voice.

The boy opened his eyes again, and his heart leapt; there in front of him was a man with green hair like his own, complete with an unusual diadem and eyepiece, giving the Team Rocket thugs some pause for thought with a long stick. After a few whacks, they ran away with their tails between their legs, and the mysterious man, barely out of breath, turned his attention to the boy.

"You... you saved me!" breathed the boy, as the rather violent man took a look at him.

"I certainly did," replied the man. "I'm Ghetsis Harmonia. Who are you?"

"N-n-n-n-n..." stammered the boy, momentarily unable to force his name out of his mouth.

"N? That's an unusual name, but so's Ghetsis, I suppose... Tell me,

how do you feel about a nice, hot bath and a cup of tea?"

"That... that'd be wonderful!" declared N, as he would henceforth be known. "But... but what about the purrlain?"

Ghetsis frowned. "Who?"

"The purrlain who tried to rescue me before you did! Those horrible pok mon might've killed her!" wailed N.

Ghetsis gave a world-weary sigh. "I'm afraid a minority of people are capable of some truly terrific acts of cruelty, and that tends to rub off on pok mon around them. Really, they're no better than those civilisations which used to keep slaves..."

"She spoke to me," said N softly.

"What?! Spoke to you?! Who did?" cried Ghetsis.

"The purrlain," replied N. "I know it sounds crazy, but she did!"

Ghetsis blinked, then a smile spread across his face. "Well, my boy, I can tell you're a little bit special in more ways than one. Tell me, who are your parents?"

N's face fell. "Gone," he replied dolefully.

"Oh. Well, I suppose you'd better come with me," said Ghetsis. "And don't worry about the purrlain. It's all part of the great circle of life..."

\* \* \*

><p>N sighed, looking down at the pok mon sitting in his lap. "You'll see, Purrlain. Your sister's sacrifice won't be for nothing. One day, all human cruelties will be erased from the world, and pok mon will finally be free!"<p>

"Purrlain! Loin purr!" said the purrlain happily.

"Are you ready, N?" said a voice, which turned out to belong to Melissa. She was the only person N was willing to see before he gave the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation one of his speeches, and her encouragement was always of help.

"Pretty much," replied N. He and Melissa made their way through the sparse but well-lit corridors of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's secret base, coming eventually to a vast auditorium/amphitheatre, containing row upon row of seats packed with P.L.A.S.M.A foundation operatives. N and Melissa entered via the back door, where three stylish (some might say garish) chairs were arranged high above the crowd: one for N, one for Melissa and one for Ghetsis. The other six of the Seven Sages sat on slightly less fancy chairs either side of them.

"Ladies and gentleman, all hail N, the King of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation!" declared Ghetsis, once N and Melissa had sat down.

"Hail!" chorused the assembled people, punching the air in dramatic



unison.

N waited for the latecomers to finish hailing him, then spoke. "Friends, pokÃ©mon, agents of P.L.A.S.M.A, lend me your ears! Today is a fairly ordinary day, but tomorrow will be much better, for it marks the beginning of our campaign to end the oppression of pokÃ©mon. At dawn the next day, Gorm of the Seven Sages will lead a detachment of our finest warriors to raid Nacrene City's museum. The museum holds an artefact vital to our operations, and we must get a hold of it, by force if absolutely necessary. There may be pokÃ©mon battles involved, but as I am sure you know, until our scientists can finish designing some weapons as effective as pokÃ©mon attacks, we have to work within the system to defeat it. Any questions?"

N waited for a few moments. No questions were forthcoming, so he carried on. "Now, there is a second, rather more delicate matter I need to discuss with you. A few days ago, three of our agents were arrested in Striaton City for beating up a wild munna," said N gravely. Gasps of horror rose from the crowd, and N pressed on. "There is no place in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation for cruel, selfish people who simply want to profit from our activities, nor is there room for those who delight in being part of a secret paramilitary organisation. I'm not saying we can't enjoy the good work we do, it's just... um..."

"If any of you hurt a living being just for the sake of it, or destroy buildings or the environment, I'll make you eat your own foot!" Melissa supplied. "Bloody scumbags, trying to ruin us from within... you deserve to die! I'll make you all pay for this! I HATE EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU!" Suddenly, she gasped and doubled over, clutching at her heart. She breathed heavily for a few moments, then sat back down, looking slightly sheepish.

"It's her blood pressure," Ghetsis whispered. "She can't really control herself."

"Anyway," said N meaningfully, "to sum up: raid on Nacrene Museum led by Zinzolin. Keep violence to a minimum. Some inevitable pokÃ©mon battles. Only honourable P.L.A.S.M.A agents welcome. Thank you. Goodbye."

"PLASMA!" cheered the assembled P.L.A.S.M.A operatives, having adopted their acronym as a sort of rallying cry.

"A most excellent speech, my boy! As speeches go, that was definitely... a speech," said Ghetsis, as he, N and Melissa made their way to the cafeteria (it was a pre-lunch speech).

"Thank you," replied N. He was glad to see how determined the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation were to achieve their goals, and even Melissa's zealous rage was good in a way. However, the three black-hearted traitorous brutes responsible for that business in the Dreamyard weighed upon his mind. Could it be that someone higher up in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation had masterminded the whole thing?...

## 6. Chapter 6: The Battle of Wellspring Cave

\*\*~Chapter Six: The Battle of Wellspring Cave, or The One where

## Cheren Finally Gets the Last Word~\*\*

It was a fine morning in Nacrene City: pidoves and tranquills raised their voices in song to greet the dawn, the smell of recently dampened earth suffused the nostrils of all who had a sense of smell, and Bianca's clothes were still wet, so she had to make do with a purple t-shirt and a pair of brown Bermuda shorts. Nevertheless, she was as bright and cheery as always, even moreso now that she knew where the helmet-disguised-as-a-hat shop was.

"I think I'll get a fedora," said Bianca, as the group wandered past Nacrene City's many old warehouses, which now served as shops, "or possibly a sombrero. Do you think I'd look good in a sou'wester? A top hat? A straw boater? Ooh, I know, a beret!"

Blake and Cheren weren't particularly surprised (although Whitney was, but had the decency to keep it to herself): Bianca was from Kalos, and fashion was big business there, particularly berets.

"I think this is it," said Cheren, gesturing with his now slightly weather-beaten staff to a fairly ordinary-looking warehouse, with faded brown walls, large, newly painted green doors and a flashing blue neon sign, which read: "Ulysses McCoy's Stylish Headgear and Helmet Emporium - Wigs Fitted while you Wait".

"Wish me luck, then," said Bianca, making her way into the shop.

After she had gone, Cheren cleared his throat in a meaningful way. "Now, my plans for today are-"

"Go to Wellspring Cave, right? I'd quite like to capture a roggennrola," Blake butted in.

Cheren, by now used to it, kept going without missing a beat. "Quite. Wellspring Cave is our first destination, then we shall focus on being pok  mon trainers for a few days until we are ready to challenge Lenora, this fair city's gym leader. After that, Pinwheel Forest and its myriad pok  mon await us!"

"It'll take us a while to catalogue all the forest-dwelling species, won't it?" asked Blake.

"Correct," replied Cheren, "which is why we'll camp out in the middle of the forest."

"Oh, right," said Blake. He should probably have known they would need to sleep under the stars sooner or later; there were only so many pok  mon centres in the world.

"Don't you mean 'awesometastic'?" asked Whitney.

"I suppose it's sort of awesome-ish, but I wouldn't know about tastic..." replied Blake.

"Are you kidding? Who could say no to living on your wits miles away from civilisation, with nothing but a few friends, some pok  mon and what little you can carry?!" demanded Whitney, ever the bold explorer. "Durant and I usually slept in trees or soft piles of leaves until we met you lot," she went on, "and we loved every minute

of it!"

Durant gave a high-pitched metallic squeak of approval.

"You've got a point," acknowledged Blake. "And who knows? It might be tastic after all..."

After a few ever-so-slightly boring minutes, Bianca emerged from the hat shop with a spring in her step and a grin like a slice of watermelon on her face. And as for her head, there sat a wide, floppy, pale green beret with a white stripe running around the sides.

"Oho! A fine choice of hat, for a fine choice of... fine choice of...? cheery fourteen-year-old girl... large appetite... blonde pigtails?... A fine choice of hat!" declared Cheren.

"I know. That's why I chose it!" said Bianca. "It's waterproof, shock-proof, non-flammable, non-corrodible, shatter-resistant and made from 100% recycled materials. I love it so much!"

Cheren blinked. His hat was just vaguely waterproof and brown.

"It definitely suits you," commented Blake.

"But doesn't this mean I'm the only representative of bare-headedness in our group?" Whitney pointed out. "That's a lot of pressure for one person..."

Durant nudged her leg. "Oh, sorry, you don't have a hat either, do you?" Whitney conceded.

"Quite right," agreed Cheren. "Now, the day is yet young, but our schedule is far from empty. Onwards, my broth- um, siblings, to Wellspring-"

"Help! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" shouted a young girl, obviously distressed, as she rushed over the long-abandoned train tracks in front of the converted warehouses, which harked back to Nacrene City's days as the freight hub of Unova.

"Oh, for Arceus's sake, why?! Why does something always interrupt me?! Can't I get through just one sentence without-"

"Be quiet, would you, Cheren? I think we should listen to her," Blake interrupted.

The girl, who had overheard, ran over and gave Blake a hug. "Oh, thank goodness! I've been screaming my tonsils off for half an hour, and no-one's done a bloomin' thing!"

"Well, we're here now, and we'll help you, bloomin' things or otherwise. What's wrong?" asked Blake.

"I was out for a walk with Sandy, my lillipup, but some nasty people called the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation came and took her, and they hurt my brother and took him too, and they said I was..." she searched her memory for a few seconds, "a vile, black-hearted, exploitative guttersnipe with less honour than a Lithuanian greengrocer and a heart like flint!"

Bianca gasped. "How horrible! Some of my best friends are greengrocers from Lithuania!"

"We need to teach these P.L.A.S.M.A people a jolly good lesson," declared Cheren.

"I wouldn't. My brother tried to protect me, and he's a totally ace pokémon trainer, but one of the nasty people knocked him out with a book!" the girl pointed out. "It was a poetry book, I think."

"Poetry or otherwise, it is the duty of all sons and daughters of Nuvema Town to root out evil wherever it lurks," Cheren insisted. "Tell me, where have the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation taken your brother and pokémon? And while you're at it, why didn't anybody listen to you before we heard your cries?"

"Well, some of the townsfolk sort of think I have maybe a sort of tendency to stir up trouble..." said the girl shiftily, "but it's not true! Anyway, this is just beating about the bush. Sandy and Talbot (that's my brother) are in Wellspring Cave. Come on!"

"Wait!" said Cheren urgently. "Before we go..." He cleared his throat. "Cheren's log, Friday the seventeenth of April: we have received a distress call from a young lady whose brother and pokémon companion have been--"

"Cheren, this is not the time!" snapped Blake, Whitney and Bianca simultaneously.

"Are we going or what?" asked the girl.

So saying, the girl ran off in the direction she had come from, followed by Blake, Whitney, Bianca and Cheren. If the Dreamyard incident was anything to go by, they shouldn't have much trouble dealing with the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, even if they had been able to defeat the girl's "totally ace" brother. On the other hand, who knew how powerful the Foundation really was? Up until a few months ago, when P.L.A.S.M.A spokespeople started making public speeches and appearing on the television, no-one had even heard of them. Was that just because they only really got going a few months ago, or was there a more long-term scheme in operation?...

\* \* \*

><p>"There's the cave," said the as-yet nameless girl, gesturing to an outcropping of brown rock, pushing up between the trees and grass of route three like an island at the centre of a green, leafy lake. A cave entrance was clearly visible, with fire or some other light source casting an orange glow from within, and above the entrance was a banner, bearing the legend "Cave claimed by the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation: trespassers will be prosecuted."<p>

"They're not very good at secrecy, are they?" Whitney pointed out.

"Indeed," said Cheren. "Now, would you recommend a frontal assault, or something more careful?"

"There's only one entrance to the cave, so it'll have to be a frontal assault, won't it?" asked the girl.

"Not necessarily," said Bianca. "Suppose we were to let all of our pok mon out of their pok balls and pretend to be a large group of pok mon rights campaigners. Then they'd let us in, and at the right moment, we could strike!"

"That's a wonderful idea," said Cheren approvingly, "but completely pointless." He could never admit that Bianca had come up with a plan better than he could. "What the girl said is true: a frontal assault would be best. Are you all ready?"

"Of course," replied Whitney. "And so's Durant," she added, noticing the metallic pok mon's look of intense readiness.

"As am I," said Blake.

"I still think we should go for my plan, but if you've got your hearts set on the direct approach, that's fine by me," said Bianca.

"All right, then," said Cheren, carefully adjusting his hat for maximum dashingness, "let's revolve!"

"Roll," Blake corrected him.

"What?" asked Cheren.

"It's 'let's roll', not revolve," Blake elaborated. "And may I just say that wasn't really in keeping with your mature, sensible persona?"

"I'm only human..." Cheren pointed out.

"In that case, the duty of battle-cries falls to me. Tally-ho!" Whitney butted in, and she and Durant rushed off to the cave.

"After her! The game's afoot and all that!" shouted Cheren, glad to be taken off the spot. He, Blake, Bianca and the girl charged into Wellspring Cave, hot on Whitney's heels, kicking up dust and water as they went, and there, waiting for them, was a lillipup and a distinct absence of P.L.A.S.M.A agents.

"It's Sandy! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" cried the girl, as the lillipup ran into her arms and set about licking her face as if it was the tastiest face in the world.

"And is that your brother?" asked Cheren, gesturing to a severely wounded boy lying on the floor of the cave.

"I suppose so," replied the girl nonchalantly. "Hey, Talbot, wake up!"

The boy groaned, indicating that, while he would like to get up, it probably wouldn't be happening any time soon. Blake and Bianca lifted him gently onto his feet (which wasn't as easy as either of them thought it would be), but he was still barely conscious.

"What have they done to him?!" cried Whitney, horrified.

"My thoughts entirely. Good heavens, man, what have they done to you?!" demanded Cheren.

"I thought I told you, they hit him over the head with a book of poetry! More to the point, where are all his pokémon?" the girl asked, adding, "He had a tranquill, a pansage and a watchog."

"Obviously the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation kidnapped them," Cheren suggested.

"Don't you think they'll be coming back here, then?" asked Bianca. "I mean, if they're willing to beat someone up and take his pokémon, they must be serious about this."

"Of course they will," replied Cheren, "and we'll be ready for them. In fact, I'll wager somewhere within the region of five P.L.A.S.M.A agents are going to come charging into this cave right about--"

"What in the Distortion Realm are you lot doing in our cave?! Didn't you read the sign?" demanded a predictable voice, coming from a middle-aged man in the usual P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation armoured raincoat. Beside him stood several more P.L.A.S.M.A agents, three of whom were human (Cheren's guess was a little bit off), silhouetted against the daylight outside the cave.

The girl gasped. "It's them!"

Blake reached casually down to Samantha's pokéball, noticing Cheren, Whitney and Bianca doing the same. In his mind, he was already running through the numerous (well, one or two) strategies he had developed for battling with Samantha, and he hoped the others were doing the same.

Cheren got straight to the point. "I presume I am addressing a representative of the Pokémon Liberation And Separatism Movement Agency Foundation?"

"That's right. What of it?" asked the P.L.A.S.M.A spokesman.

"Then you'd be the ones who shamelessly and with malice aforethought kidnapped this fine young lillipup, who, incidentally, seems quite happy to be with her human friend again. Well, we're putting a stop to it! You most certainly have the right to curb the excesses of cruel and thoughtless humans, but in beating a young boy up and kidnapping pokémon who are loved and cared for, you have proven yourselves no better than Team Rocket. What have you to say for yourselves?!" demanded Cheren. For all his shenanigans, he looked like he meant business, so it felt perfectly natural for Bianca, Whitney and Blake to assemble themselves into a phalanx with him at its head. They didn't, though, deciding it looked better to stand side-by-side.

The P.L.A.S.M.A agents were not impressed, least of all their spokesman. "Let me make something clear: all pokémon trainers are evil, and you being all self-righteous won't change a thing. You force innocent pokémon to unleash havoc upon each other, then claim the glory for yourselves. Do the pokémon get any say in this?"

"Of course they do!" said Bianca hotly. "I always ask a pokémon's permission before I catch it."

"That may be or it mayn't... uh, may not, but you're in a minority. If you stand in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's way, then in the name of all pokémon, we will show you no mercy!" declared the spokesman.

"You don't have the right!" said Blake angrily. He had never been one to not stand up to bullies, and while this lot weren't exactly common-or-garden mean people, they definitely needed taking down a peg. "Who are you to decide pokémon training isn't allowed any more?! And for that matter, how do you intend to put a stop to it? What about disabled people who need pokémon to care for them?!"

"They're fine," another P.L.A.S.M.A agent spoke up, "as long as the pokémon are offering their help willingly."

"Okay, think about this," Whitney piped up. "Pokémon are capable of levelling mountains, eating solid steel, melting diamonds, causing forests to spring up from deserts, creating vast lakes and volcanoes, even remaking the universe, and there are three hundred times as many of them on this planet as there are humans. That's more than a trillion pokémon! Just how could we even begin to subjugate them?!"

The P.L.A.S.M.A agents glanced at each other. "Give us a moment, would you?" asked the designated spokesman, and they went into a huddle, whispering fiercely amongst themselves. After a few moments, they were ready to respond.

"Your pathetic derailing arguments won't get you anywhere!" snapped the spokesman. "You've trespassed on your last cave, you meddling brats. P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, go forth and conquer!"

The four human P.L.A.S.M.A agents retrieved the usual wooden bludgeons from the folds of their armoured raincoats, and the group surged forwards. There must have been at least fifteen of them in total, and Blake suddenly felt very much out of his depth, even with his two best friends and one bushy-haired girl he met a few days ago there beside him. On the other hand, if this was to be some sort of free-for-all melee, every man, woman or 'mon for itself, standard league rules almost certainly didn't apply.

"Samantha, Lilly, Patrick, Darkblade, Lyoko, attack!" shouted Blake, tossing all his poké-balls at the P.L.A.S.M.A operatives. The oshawott, lillipup, patrat, audino and purrlain materialised with five flashes of light all at once, which was almost blinding. Samantha quickly took the lead, giving a rousing cry of "Oshawott! Wott osha oshawott wott!", Lyoko ignored her, Darkblade gave an enemy sandile a cuddle, Lilly bit the P.L.A.S.M.A spokesman on the ankle and Patrick found himself cornered by two pansears. Bianca and Cheren's pokémon were fighting as well, with varying degrees of success, although Durant was still the only one of Whitney's pokémon to be seen.

"I don't think we can hold them off!" cried Bianca, trying desperately to wrest her brand-new hat from the arms of a watchog.

"Speak for yourself," retorted Whitney, who, working in tandem with Durant, had lain low the other three human P.L.A.S.M.A agents.

"Can someone please tell me what's going on?" groaned Talbot, who had been taken to a safe corner in the back of the cave, and was now watched over by Sandy and his sister.

"Stop talking! This is a fight, for pity's sake!" shouted Cheren.

"We surrender!" wailed one of the P.L.A.S.M.A agents, momentarily regaining consciousness.

"Is that a unanimous vote?" asked Whitney.

"I suppose so..." sighed the P.L.A.S.M.A spokesman. He slumped down on the floor of the cave, his ankle only now released by Lilly, to await whatever horrible punishment these young agents of evil would mete out to him.

"All right! We did it!" whooped Bianca, raising her hand to high-five anyone willing. After a few awkward seconds, she lowered her hand, looking slightly sheepish.

\* \* \*

><p>"So let me get this straight," said N, to the rather worried messenger standing in front of the special desk he used for dealing with unsuccessful agents. "Four teenagers, one incapacitated enemy, a preteen girl and lots of pokÃ©mon managed to defeat our advance scouting party?"<p>

"That's right, my lord," replied the messenger, playing nervously with a strand of her unwieldy purple hair. "One of them had a durant," she added.

N was not angry; he considered himself above such things as vindictive rage, and besides, it wasn't the messenger's fault. "Tell me, what did Gorm have to say for himself?"

"Well, he, uh, said the advance party underestimated the pokÃ©mon trainers. He claimed it was a disgraceful failure to anticipate the power of our enemy, and whoever was responsible should be sacked immediately," replied the messenger.

"And what do you think?" asked N.

"Well..." said the messenger, "quite frankly, I think Gorm's to blame. Tactical decisions were his responsibility, and..."

"I see," said N. "Go and fetch Gorm, would you?"

As the messenger rushed off to summon Gorm, N found himself wondering what he was like at her age. True, he was only about three years older, but in his mind he was already a great deal more experienced. It was mainly thanks to Ghetsis. The old warrior had taken N as his son and opened his eyes to how badly pokÃ©mon were treated; when was the last time a pokÃ©mon had presented a TV programme, released a hit single, or even spoke fluent Japanese? It was thanks to him that N



had met Melissa and the other six of the Seven Sages, and Ghetsis had been a major part in N's martial arts training as well. Every living thing had untapped potential, and it was thanks to people and/or pokÃ©mon like Ghetsis that a lucky few of them could achieve that potential.

\_When I take over Unova, no-one will have to go through life without knowing the power inside them,\_ N promised himself. He was brought out of his thoughts by a mild kerfuffle outside his office.

"Look here, you purple-haired prat, I'm busy! Whatever N wants can wait!" snapped the vaguely Lancashirian voice of the sage Gorm.

"I don't care if you were in the middle of recalibrating your jet-powered hairdryer, if Lord N wants to see you, I'll make it happen!" retorted the messenger. The door burst open, and N was only mildly surprised to see her dragging Gorm in by his oversized grey beard.

"Ah, Gorm," said N amiably, "do take a seat. I have much to discuss with you."

Gorm sighed, lifting up his purple robes and sitting primly on the chair opposite N. "Can this not be too long, Your Majesty? Only I was in the middle of drawing up some battle plans, and you know how these things are..."

"I do know how these things are," N assured the sage, "which is why I'd like to know why you so seriously underestimated the four warriors who defeated our advance scouting party."

Gorm shifted nervously. "Well, it's like this. The advance party was, as their name would suggest, sent in advance, so I wasn't there to estimate any threats. Apparently the enemies got the drop on them. So you see, it wasn't really my fault."

"Oh," said N. "Well, in that case, you've done nothing wrong. Thank you for your time, Gorm."

Gorm blinked. "Really?"

"I am not in the habit of lying to any of my army of light, least of all the Sages," N pointed out.

"I see. Well, if there's nothing more you want of me, I shall return to my plans," said Gorm, with a certain amount of relief.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," said N mysteriously. "I'll be taking command of the attack on Nacrene City myself. Can't be too careful, can we?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty," Gorm conceded. "May I ask when you plan to attack next?"

"I'd say... Tuesday, maybe Wednesday if it's wet. No later than Friday, though," replied N. "You may leave now."

Gorm rose to his feet and made his way out, giving the messenger a rather nasty look in the process.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, are you sure you can trust Gorm?" asked the messenger, once Gorm was out of earshot.

N gave her a funny look. "Of course! I mean, who can I trust if not my inner circle? I might as well put a webcam in Ghetsis's room and start listening in on Melissa!"

"If you say so, Sire," the messenger conceded.

\* \* \*

><p>"So let me get this straight," said the police officer, it being a good way to start part of a story in medias res, "you took on four members of a criminal organization alone, without even considering calling the police or telling a responsible adult?"<p>

"That's right," replied Cheren. It was early afternoon in Nacrene City, and the P.L.A.S.M.A agents were being frogmarched into the police station, while a chansey tended to Tablot's wounds and Cheren explained his group's actions, of which his were, of course, the bravest and most competent.

The policeman grinned. "Well done, you four! That's exactly the way a responsible Unovan child should behave."

"Oh, it was nothing!" said Bianca, a blush developing on each cheek.

"Although, if what you say is true, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation is a serious threat. How long will the four of you be in Nacrene City?" asked the policeman.

"Not more than a week, I'm sure," replied Cheren.

"But my sister and I are here to stay," Talbot interjected. He was going to be wheelchair-bound for a month or so, but with Sandy and his sister to look after him, he was sure to be fine.

"Right... that gives us less than a week to get our defences in order. You must understand that Unova's never been threatened by war or criminal gangs before, what with evil being the least common of all political alignments and humans and pokÃ©mon living in harmony and all that, so this is a bit new to us. You children will keep an eye out for the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation on your travels, won't you?" the officer enquired.

"Of course!" replied Cheren. "As warriors of Nuvema Town, we are sworn to root out evil wherever it may lurk. You can count on us."

"Actually, it's funny you should mention Nuvema Town, but there's a semi-retired samurai there called Ravyn Stormheart. She's my mother, so I know she's trustworthy," Blake pointed out.

"I see. Well, thank you for your cooperation," said the policeman, and he strode purposefully off to phone Blake's mother.

After a few minutes, Whitney decided to bring to the fore something that had been in her mind. "Blake, your name's Blake Stormheart, and your mother's called Ravyn?"

"Yes," replied Blake, slightly nervous about what point she was about to make.

"Doesn't that strike you as a little bit contrived?" asked Whitney.

"Contrived? I suppose it could be, but... Well, you're one to talk, Whitney Blazeheart the Complete Hoyden, Battle-Strategist and Free Spirit!" Blake pointed out. "Besides, my family have a long-standing history of greatness."

"Well, that's fair enough," said Whitney, resolving to count the days until Blake discovered he had Aura powers or got a black belt in karate. "Cheren, you're always on about the ancient and noble house of McTavish. Have you anything to say?"

"Of course!" replied Cheren. Blake and Bianca sighed. They knew what was coming. "The founding fathers and mothers of the House of McTavish arrived in Unova in 257 BC on a three-masted ship, launched from Berwick-upon-Tweed. They sailed for three weeks, facing mighty sea monsters and dragons not to be found in any modern pokÃ©dex, until at last they arrived here in Unova and settled Nuvema Town. Back then, ownership of Unova was still disputed by Japan and America, so they had to learn both languages. In 249 BC, the first great hero of the McTavishes rose to fame: a mighty warrior, Caitlin McTavish, who rode a zebstrika and wielded a sword of solidified lunar iron. The rogue ninjas of ancient Opelucid City tried to steal her thunder, but-

"Cheren, how much of this is actually true?" asked Bianca.

"Absolutely none," replied Cheren, completely unabashed. "Come along, now; we need to heal our pokÃ©mon, then get some more practice on the field of battle."

"That's music to my ears!" declared Whitney.

"And perfume to my nose, sugar to my tongue, a nice picture to my eyes and a fluffy blanket to my skin," said Bianca, who liked taking things to their logical extremes.

"Soft, springy grass to my feet?" suggested Blake.

"Cool, squishy mud to mine," Whitney agreed, "or a mountain stream at a pinch."

Blake and Bianca were bad enough, but Whitney as well was too much for Cheren. "Will you stop it?!" he cried.

"We might, if it were worth our-

"SHUT UP!" shouted Cheren.

Blake, Whitney and Bianca stared at him, too surprised to speak. Cheren could not help but grin: at long last, he had got the final word.

## 7. Chapter 7: Watchog versus Fraxure

\*\*~Chapter Seven: Watchog vs the Dragon Warlord~\*\*

\*\*~Author's Note~\*\*

The Japanese word "genki" is used in this chapter. It refers to somebody energetic or enthusiastic, possessed of an abundance of zest and with a tendency to do everything happily and much too fast. It also carries connotations of immaturity and stupidity, as well as having blonde hair and pigtails. You can see where this is going, can't you?

\*\*And now, on with the story:\*\*

"All right," said Cheren in a leaderly fashion, "now that we've finished severely depleting the pok  mon centre's stock of replicator batteries-

"Which was absolutely not my fault! I mean, how was I to know how much energy it takes to produce kendal mint cake?!" Bianca butted in.

Cheren sighed. "You may not have known how much energy it takes, but I've just received a hefty invoice from the local Nurse Joy, and she did not look happy!"

It was morning once more in Nacrene City, and Cheren and Bianca were already on the verge of an all-out brawl. They generally did on Tuesdays, of which this day was one.

"You did tell her it was an accident, didn't you?" asked Bianca.

"I did," replied Cheren, "so she suggested you should accidentally pay her."

"Just how much do these batteries cost, anyway?" Bianca asked. "I mean, they generally let people use the replicators for free, so..."

"Not much more than ordinary batteries," replied Cheren, "but the issue here is how much kendal mint cake you replicated."

"I need to maintain my figure, and that means eating lots! Do you realise how much energy it takes to be cheerful all day?!" demanded Bianca.

This clash of ideologies had been going on for years now, albeit irregularly and infrequently, and it was no use trying to get anything out of them, so Blake methodically moved his plastic chair around the rustic outdoor table to where Whitney was sitting, and sat back down.

"Nice day, don't you think?" he asked, it being a time-tested conversation starter.

"You're right about that," agreed Whitney. "So, what are you plans for today?"

"Well, Lenora has normal-type pok  mon, and they're pretty strong.

That leaves me with one obvious option: capture a roggenrola," replied Blake. "It'll have a type advantage and good defences, which might just give me the edge."

"Oh. Well, I've got Durant for that," said Whitney.

"Just Durant?" asked Blake, having suspected as much ever since Cheren started voicing his curiosity in his logs.

"Of course not! I've got... well, actually, I'd rather it be a surprise," Whitney replied.

"Suit yourself," said Blake. "Anyway, I'll be going to Wellspring Cave. What will you do?"

"I already have everything I need to challenge Lenora," replied Whitney, "but come to think of it, my other pokÃ©mon could use a little exercise. We'll be in the forest."

"Pinwheel Forest?" asked Blake.

"No, the forest around Wellspring Cave," replied Whitney. "Honestly, it's as if there is some sort of invisible barrier in front of every forest in the world other than Pinwheel Forest which only I can cross!"

"If I could have your attention, please," said Cheren loudly, drawing Blake and Whitney's eyes to his visage, "Bianca and I have resolved this minor dispute, so here's our plan for today..."

There was a pause. Blake and Whitney looked expectantly at Cheren, while Bianca carefully re-braided her hair, it having come undone when Cheren shouted at her.

"...Oh, aren't you going to interrupt me? Well, thank the Llama Queen!" he declared, Llama Queen being a polite way of referring to Arceus, seeing as how she was the Queen of the Universe and she looked a bit like a llama. "Our plan for today is to-"

"I'm going to Wellspring Cave to catch a roggenrola, and Whitney's going to train in secret in the forest! As for you and Bianca, I'm sure you can work something out," declared Blake.

Cheren turned a fetching shade of crimson, while Bianca, Whitney and Blake fell about laughing. "When we get to the pokÃ©mon league, you're all going down!" he vowed, before turning on his heel and striding furiously off to go and sulk.

The laughter around the table quickly died down. "You... you don't think we've overdone it, do you?" asked Whitney worriedly.

"Not at all!" Blake reassured her. "Cheren's always vowing revenge on us, right Bianca?"

"Um... actually, we do seem to make Cheren the butt of our jokes quite a lot," said Bianca, slightly nervous to be voicing such a controversial idea.

"Really?" asked Blake. He tried to remember any times Cheren came out the worse in any of their interactions. "Well, there was that time me

and Bianca dressed up as darmanitans and hid in one of his birthday presents, that incident with the hosepipe and the treacle tart, all those times I tried to distract him while he was reading, Bianca calling him a snooty-pants pretty much every day since she was eight years old, us never letting him finish a sentence when he's trying to boss us around, doing everything in our power to annoy him, our tendency to ignore him, and then there's all the wild pokémon ruining his cape..." Blake began to look slightly worried. "This is a long list, isn't it?"

"Don't forget us teasing him about his logs," Bianca pointed out, "or me being extra cheerful and genki-ish just to stick in his craw."

"On the other hand," said Whitney, "he's not exactly mr easy-to-get-along-with, is he?"

"True," said Blake. "I suppose this'll blow over. Coming, Whitney?"

"What? No, you've misunderstood me. I'm not coming to Wellspring Cave with you, you're coming with me," said Whitney.

"What? Well, if it makes you feel any better..." said Blake.

\* \* \*

><p>True to her word, Whitney led the way as she and Blake headed to Wellspring Cave and Bianca went off to do who-knew-what. They parted ways outside the cave, and once Blake had found a suitable area with plenty of cave-dwelling woobats and roggennrolas to watch and give advice, it was time to train.<p>

Blake released Samantha, Lilly, Lyoko, Patrick and Darkblade. The five pokémon took a moment to take in their dark, stony surroundings, then, in their myriad ways, stood to attention. Except, of course, Lyoko.

"All right," said Blake, "I've brought you here to help you become stronger, so you can... fight my enemies more easily." That hadn't come out right. "Er, what I mean is, so you can grow stronger and more confident in yourselves, and we can take on greater challenges without losing so often we don't learn anything from it." That was more like it.

"Pup lilli lillipup!" declared Lilly, clearly excited.

"Purrloin loin loin purr..." sighed Lyoko. Honestly, that lillipup was such a suck-up!

"Osha!" snapped Samantha, glaring at Lyoko, who completely failed to wither before her gaze and repent all his sins. He never did.

"To that end, what we need is some sort of exercise regime. I'll do it as well, of course," said Blake, who would never give N the satisfaction of being right about him. The fact that he had no idea what the mysterious P.L.A.S.M.A agent thought of him didn't matter one bit; he had a few shrewd ideas, and if N actually believed them, he was wrong. "First, all of us do fifteen press-ups, then ten laps of the cave, then fifteen star-jumps, then ten more laps of the cave,

then we have a rest. After that, the five of you practice battle techniques, and I..." Blake shifted nervously. He hadn't thought this far. "...I'll think of something."

With that, Blake lowered himself onto the damp, dusty cave floor, noticing with approval his pok  mon doing likewise. "One, two, three, four... five..." This was a lot harder than it looked, and Blake's arms were starting to develop a newfound respect for his legs. "Six... seven... eight..."

"Patrat rat," said Patrick, after finishing his fifteenth press-up.

"Oshawott wott," agreed Samantha.

"Eleven, twelve-" Blake noticed Cheren observing the exercise with dispassionate haughtiness and redoubled his efforts. "Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred! Oh, hi, Cheren. I didn't see you there."

"Yes you did," said Cheren savvily. "How's the training going, old shoe?"

"Quite well, although Lyoko's being his usual self. What about you?"

"I have released Snivy and the others into the forest, with strict instructions to get as fit as possible in my absence," replied Cheren. "I myself have been in Lenora's public library, reading up on good ways to defeat pok  mon trainers who favour the normal type. Ah, sweet irony! How sweetly ironic it is!"

"You mean you've... you've just left them to it?" Blake asked slightly dubiously.

"Yes," replied Cheren. Then, noticing Blake's dubiosity, he added, "Oh, don't worry! I've given them strict instructions not to disturb the delicate balance of nature, eat any wild pok  mon or attack travellers, so there'll be no problems."

"Pup?" said Lillipup confusedly. Since when did pok  mon disturb the balance of nature? They were the balance of nature! Well, most of them anyway...

"Okay," said Blake, seeing no reason not to trust Cheren. "Have you met Lenora, then?"

"Not as such, but I'm sure she's a perfectly decent opponent," replied Cheren. "Incidentally, are you sure Lyoko actually wants you to be his trainer?"

"Not really," Blake admitted, "but I'm going to give him a chance anyway."

A cry of "Osha! Oshawott wott wott!" caught Blake's attention, and he looked over his shoulder to see that Samantha, Lilly, Patrick and Darkblade had already done their first ten laps of the cave, while Lyoko sauntered to the end of his third lap. "I'd better get going," Blake declared, breaking into a jog fast enough to count as running, but slow enough that his relatively long strides wouldn't send him

careering into a wall.

"Wait, you're doing this too?!" cried Cheren.

"Of course!" replied Blake.

Cheren gave a weary sigh. That boy was always doing things beyond his understanding, and if his present suspicions were true, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation had a lot to answer for...

\* \* \*

><p>Three days later, a gentle shower of rain was dampened the streets and rooftops and filled the puddles of Nacrene City, which irked Bianca to no end, as she'd just started wearing her usual clothes again. On the other hand, she could barely contain her excitement at the prospect of challenging Lenora.<p>

"I mean, just think! By this time tomorrow, we'll have two gym badges apiece!" Bianca declared, as she skipped down the road, uncaring of the splashes from any puddles she encountered along the way or the funny looks she got from passers-by, including one darumaka who actually breathed fire her when she inadvertently splashed him.

"Bianca, calm down, will you?! You're going to burst something!" Cheren declared.

"Shan't!" retorted Bianca, sticking her tongue out at him.

And who could blame her? Although Bianca eclipsed them all, Blake, Whitney and Cheren were all feeling confident about the battle. Blake hadn't managed to get the roggennrola he was after, but he was more than confident in the rest of his pokÃ©mon. They might even evolve! As for Whitney, she was quietly confident, and Cheren was claiming to have an ace up his sleeve as well.

"Aha! Here we are: Nacrene City gym, library and museum!" declared Cheren, his body language calling a halt outside the building's elegant stone-and-wood frontispiece. Two other people were there: a teenage girl with orange hair and plenty of pokÃ©-balls, and a fairly ordinary-looking man shouting at her.

"Look, Lenora simply isn't available for a battle at the moment, all right?! She's busy!" the man declared.

"Oh, bloody distortion-realm-fire! This happens every time!" snapped Cheren.

"Not every time," Whitney pointed out, "but near enough."

"Well, can you at least tell us why she's unavailable?" asked the orange-haired girl.

"She won't even tell me," the man pointed out, "and I'm her husband. I mean, you'd think after all I've done for her a little gratitude would be in order, but no..."

"In that case, sir, please feel free to notify me if there are any problems," Cheren offered. "I have the allegiance of three talented



young pokémon trainers, and-

"I mean, who does she think I am?!" the man continued. "I practically run the place, for pity's sake! Who curates the museum, I ask you?! Who takes care of the library and everything when she's off digging up old bones and rusty bits of metal in some Arceus-forsaken wasteland in the middle of nowhere?! Muggins here, that's who!" In a towering rage, he threw open the doors and marched into the building. "Lenora! I want a word with you as soon as conceivably possible!"

Cheren looked at Whitney. Blake looked at Bianca. After satisfying herself that everyone had looked at and been looked at by everyone else, Bianca spoke.

"Celebrity marriages never last, do they?" she asked.

"True enough," said Cheren. "Do you think we should go in after him? I'm open to any suggestions."

"Well, there's no harm in seeing what's wrong," suggested Whitney.

Blake thought for a moment. "I concur. I mean, it might just be official stuff, but there's no harm in checking."

"I have no idea what anyone's on about, but I'll do what Whitney and Blake are doing," said Bianca.

"Then that's settled!" said Cheren. He glanced at the other pokémon trainer. "Are you coming?"

"I may well," the girl acquiesced.

Before anyone could do anything, however, the voice of a woman who while usually calm and rational was now in a fury came echoing out through the door. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN, I DON'T PULL MY WEIGHT?! This museum would be nothing without me finding stuff to put in it, and as for the library and gym, I'm the bloody head librarian and gym leader! When was the last time you fought off twelve challengers, hunted down two late books and reorganised the reference section in one day?!"

"Never, but that's not the point! I'm the curator! Why do I get door duty every time you're busy?!" retorted Lenora's husband.

"Cheren, do you maybe think we should come back tomorrow?" asked Whitney quietly.

"We'll see," replied Cheren.

"The only reason we don't have a proper door guard is you're always on at me about money! Oh no, we can't have any proper security, new display cabinets, new stock, any more pokémon, any resident trainers or a proper computer 'cause it's TOO BLOODY EXPENSIVE! Doesn't the phrase "investing in a brighter tomorrow" mean anything to you?!" demanded Lenora.

"Oh, shut up!" shouted the curator.

"You shut up!" retorted Lenora, which was quickly followed by a loud, painful-sounding thump.

"I think we'd better step in about now," suggested the orange-haired girl.

"Excellent idea! Now, young lady, or whatever you like to be called, I am Cheren McTavish, son of Gerald and Christobel, and heir to the throne of-"

"Don't care!" declared the girl, rushing inside.

"What?! If we're to defuse whatever tense situation awaits us inside this building, we must work together! Get back here and-"

"Come on, Cheren, time's a-waisting!" Blake interrupted him, rushing in after the orange-haired girl. He was dimly aware of Whitney, Bianca and a rather put-out Cheren coming after him as he pursued the girl past several display cases filled with all manner of mysterious artefacts, then rows upon rows of laden bookshelves, then finally into a spacious battle arena with enough seating for a relatively small audience. A large skylight bathed the room in natural light, and a few boxes were piled up next to the door. Standing there in the middle of the battlefield were Lenora, made instantly recognisable by her green afro haircut, flared beige trousers and general unusual demeanour, and her husband, looking for all the world as if nothing untoward had ever occurred.

The orange-haired girl couldn't for the life of her figure out what had happened. "But... you were screaming at each other just twenty-three point seven one four seconds ago!"

"I know. It was an elaborate act to assess you and those other pokémon trainers just arriving," Lenora informed her.

Blake stared at Lenora, then at the curator, then at the girl, and then, running out of things to stare at, gave Whitney a quizzical look.

Whitney shrugged. "These gym leaders are crazy."

"Now, since you've all passed our test with flying colours, I take it you're here to challenge me to a gym battle?" asked Lenora, taking in the appearances of the five challengers before her.

"Indeed. My compatriots and I have been practicing for this event for many a moon!" replied Cheren.

"He means him, me, the girl with the beret and that other lad," Whitney elaborated.

"So am I," agreed the orange-haired girl.

"Great! Who's first?" asked Lenora.

"That will remain to be seen," said a new voice. Whitney gasped. There was no mistaking that voice: it was N.

"What's going on? Who was that? Why's Whitney gasping?!" demanded Bianca, in a panic.

"Keep calm, everyone!" Cheren shouted. "The first thing we do in these situations is... not panic! The second thing is to think of a plan, to which end I suggest we..."

Having long since learned to block out background noise, Blake reached down for a couple of poké-balls, assuring himself that he was perfectly calm and collected.

"Who is to say what will remain to be seen?! Show yourself!" shouted Lenora, satisfied that the minor panic had gone on long enough for her to step in.

"It is I, N Harmonia, King of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation," declared N, stepping out from the shadow of some boxes, "and I have come to distract you."

"King of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation?!" cried Bianca. "Does that mean Melissa's the queen and Ghetsis is the grand vizier?"

N was momentarily flustered. "No! Me and Melissa, we've just... we... that is to say, I... she... this is beside the point!"

"Then what is the point, friend? We're all ears," said Lenora, fixing N with a steely gaze carefully calculated to intimidate him.

N met the gym leader's gaze with a similar gaze of his own, remaining silent.

"Spit it out, you odious, green-haired twonk!" shouted Whitney. "No offence," she added, remembering Lenora's hair colour.

"Very well," said N, adopting a casual, smooth, completely conversational demeanour. "As I said, I am here to distract you."

"From what?" asked Lenora.

"That's a very good question. I daresay there are few here who wouldn't want to know the answer," said N, with a faint smile.

"What are you distracting us from?" Lenora repeated, her tone suggesting that a lack of answer would not go down well.

"A thing," N replied gnomically, "from which you need to be distracted."

Lenora sighed. "We're not getting anywhere like this, are we?"

"You can say that again!" agreed Bianca.

"We're not getting anywhere like-"

"Oh, don't!" groaned the curator.

Lenora ignored him magnificently. "-this, are we? How about this: you tell us what we're being distracted from, and I don't set my pokémon on you."

N's eyes narrowed. "You'll set your pok  mon on me? How do you think they feel about being used as a private army?"

"Here we go..." sighed Whitney, rolling her eyes. Although Blake hadn't been chasing N nearly as long as her, he could easily understand how his pok  mon liberation rhetoric could get a little bit tedious.

"What do you mean, "here we go"? Have you met him before?" asked the orange-haired girl curiously.

Whitney nodded. "\_Many\_ times."

"Wow. I've never met a fanatical pok  mon rights activist before! You must be a real woman of the world."

"Well, I try..." said Whitney, flushing with pride.

"If you're quite finished..." said N heavily.

"My pok  mon are warriors, and I'm their commander. That's all," said Lenora. She could tell N was not your average young, green-haired person, but nor was she, so she had nothing to worry about. "I mean, why do you think the rest of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation do what you say?"

N took a deep breath and turned to gaze dramatically into the distance. "The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation follow me because it's the right thing to do. We fight for a common purpose: purging the world of human cruelties. In the time of my distant ancestor Jenny Harmonia, there was no distinction between pok  mon and humans, or indeed any lack of magical powers on our part. She founded what is now the pok  mon league not as a place for humans to win glory from the blood of innocent pok  mon forced to fight, but as a university for the greatest warriors of any species to grow stronger and more warriorish, that the world would forever be protected from evil. Jenny's legacy still lives, both in the many unimaginative female police officers with her name and hair colour, and in me. I, Ghetsis, Melissa and all of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation would see the world she envisioned renewed, the union of man, woman and 'mon made whole once more!" he retorted.

"Well, lah-de-dah!" said Lenora scathingly. "Listen, N, I think you're forgetting-"

There was an explosion, and within seconds the chaotic shouting and random loud sounds of a P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation strike team attacking a building were ringing in everybody's ears.

N grinned. "Aha! My distraction worked!" He took a moment to bask in the looks of horror coming from his enemies, and the blind fury from Whitney. "I wouldn't go and try anything drastic, Lenora: by the time you, your husband and these teenagers get your acts in order, my people will have already escaped with their goal. For your own sakes, I- wait, stop! Get back here!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, good heavens, no!" Lenora breathed, as the seven humans and one durant piled into the building's museum section. All but one of

the display cases had been smashed open, leaving glittering shards of glass all over the floor, and many of the exhibits were lying in several pieces amid the debris. The front door, which had seemed so strong, heavy and door-ish, had been rent asunder like a piece of paper. What exactly had destroyed the door could not be deducted from the wreckage itself, but the large, battle-scarred fraxure glowering at everyone from the doorframe was something of a giveaway.<p>

"Hey, that's a new one!" declared Bianca, reaching for her pok dex.

"Bianca, this is hardly the time!" snapped Cheren. Bianca pouted.

"Excuse me, did you have anything to do with this, by any chance?" Lenora asked the fraxure.

The waist-high, green and grey reptilian glowered at her. "Fraxure rax frax xure rax!" he growled, making the size of his bladelike tusks impossible to ignore.

"Fraxure, let us pass!" said Lenora sternly. "Or are you part of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation?"

The fraxure nodded proudly.

"Oh, nuts..." sighed Lenora. "Okay, stay well back, everyone." She retrieved a pok ball from one of her pockets and activated it. "Watchog, I choose you!"

With a flash of light, tall, slender pok mon with brown fur, yellow stripes, chubby cheeks and a long tail appeared in front of the fraxure. He was slightly taller than the dragon pok mon, but to say that he looked a good match for him would be like saying a weasel was a good match for a crocodile.

"That's another new pok mon!" cried Bianca, clearly excited. She retrieved her pok dex and set about scanning the fraxure and watchog, ignoring Cheren's protests. In the privacy of his mind, Blake understood perfectly: it was classic displacement activity. Either that, or she was just extremely silly.

"Fraxure, you may either step aside and let us pass or face defeat at the hands... er, at the paws of Watchog. The choice is yours," Lenora offered. In response, the fraxure raised a clawed hand aflame with bluish-purple dragon energy and thwacked Watchog halfway across the room.

"That was dragon claw, one of the most powerful dragon-type attacks!" cried Cheren, in case anyone present didn't know.

Lenora helped Watchog to his feet, then stood aside. "Use hyper fang!" she ordered, and Watchog leapt at the fraxure, baring his long front teeth, completely undaunted by the dragon's power. He knew Lenora wouldn't let him get killed.

The fraxure slashed at Watchog with his tusk, then gasped in horror as Watchog grasped the tusk firmly between his teeth, picked the fraxure up and threw him against a replica Rosetta stone. The fraxure, to give him credit, got straight back on his feet, the tip

of each tusk now a dark blue ember.

"He's going to use dual chop, I think," Cheren declared. "It hits twice, but is slightly innacurate and-"

"Excuse me, Watchog and my wife are trying to concentrate," the curator pointed out.

"...Well, quite," said Cheren sheepishly.

"Don't worry, Cheren. You can commentate next time," Whitney reassured him quietly. Blake bit down a protest, reasoning that, even if she was giving him ideas, at least the two of them seemed to be friends now.

"I think it's time to put an end to this. Use hypnosis," ordered Lenora. Watchog raised a paw, fixing the fraxure with an intense stare, and sent a wave of psychic energy at him. He fell asleep in mid-double chop, and it was only through Watchog's quick thinking that he didn't fall on him.

"Golly! They did it!" cried Bianca.

"You did it, Lenora!" agreed the curator.

"Watchog did most of it, but thanks anyway," Lenora pointed out. "Okay, now that the fraxure is no longer a threat... what did the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation take?" she said, mostly to herself.

"You'll never find out," said N, who had mysteriously appeared behind Lenora, as per his modus operandi. "Guarding the door of this building is Fraxure, Dragon-Warlord of the Federation of Victory Road PokÃ©mon, and... oh."

Lenora followed his gaze to the snoozing fraxure. "Yep, that's what my Watchog did, thanks to the power of friendship and all that."

N stared at the fraxure, numb with shock. He had did this. Him, and all the other humans in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. Oh, sure, Fraxure was a lot more powerful than just about any other similar pokÃ©mon, but nobody had volunteered to stay with him, had they?

"Fraxure, I... I'm so sorry," N whispered, a single tear dropping from his eye to land on one of Fraxure's tusks.

"What was that?" asked Lenora curiously.

"I swear, I will avenge you. Come on, you bunch of idiots! I'll take you all on!" roared N. He flung himself at Lenora, bearing her to the ground, and hit her with every ounce of strength he had.

"Hey! Get off her!" shouted the curator, grabbing N by the scruff of the neck and hauling him off Lenora. Lenora took the opportunity to give N a karate chop in the neck, only to be repaid in double by the P.L.A.S.M.A king's boot.

"Blake, what do we do?" asked Bianca, who was trying not to look too worried.

"Um... Whitney, what's the plan?" asked Blake.

Whitney was a lot better at fighting than an average human, but N had by now got both Lenora and her husband in a headlock, so she was reluctant to get ahead of herself. "What's our next move, Cheren?"

"Well, I... what's your take on this situation?" Cheren asked of the orange-haired girl.

"I thought you'd never ask!" said the girl happily. "N is capable of punching with a force of at least 5000 newtons, which suggests he has an advanced knowledge of martial arts. The fact that he is capable of defeating two healthy adults at the same time supports this theory, so I would say we approach him with extreme caution. The logical approach would be to-"

"Oh, for crying out loud, we don't have the time!" snapped Blake, throwing his five poké-balls onto the glass-strewn floor. "Get him, everyone!"

"What are you doing?!" cried Whitney, taken aback.

"Being heroic!" replied Blake. "Come on, you five, let's-"

N casually pinched a pressure point on Blake's neck. He fell to the ground, helpless and paralysed, just as Samantha spewed out some finest-quality water into N's face. What happened next he could only hear, but it did not seem to be going well, right up until Templeton set N's trousers on fire.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, what exactly did the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation steal from you?" Blake asked, about half an hour later. He was still feeling rather groggy from N's nerve-pinch, but the emergency smelling-salts Bianca's father had packed for her were enough to keep him conscious.<p>

"A fossilized pokémon skull," replied the curator. "I honestly can't understand why they want it; unless you're an archaeologist or paleontologist, it has no value whatsoever."

"Maybe N's also an archaeologist," Bianca suggested.

N, who was sitting bound and gagged next to the table, shook his head wearily.

"Oh. Well, does the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation want to resurrect the pokémon so they can liberate it?" Bianca offered. N merely rolled his eyes.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter that much," Lenora conceded. "What matters is we've caught the ringleader and a powerful fraxure. Speaking of which, I'd better call the police, hadn't I?"

"That would be wise," agreed Cheren.

"I know. Anyway, I may have to step up my game if the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation are going to start attacking built-up areas. A gym leader's duty is to their city, not just the pokémon league," Lenora

pointed out. "On the other hand, you were all hoping for a battle, weren't you?"

"We were," Cheren confirmed. "But if you're going to be busy, we'll understand."

"All right, then... I don't suppose you'd care to help rebuild my gym first?"

## 8. Chapter 8: Facing Lenora

\*\*~Chapter Eight: Our Heroes Finally get to Battle Lenora, and Other Stuff Happens as Well~\*\*

"Cheren's log, Thursday the twenty-third of April: after my group completed repairs on Lenora's gym, with assistance from a surprisingly intelligent girl named Stacey, we are now ready to--"

"What do you mean, surprisingly intelligent?!" demanded Stacey, the orange-haired girl the group met a couple of days ago.

Cheren shifted nervously. "Well, to be honest... uh..."

"He thinks orange hair is a sign of immaturity," said Blake. He, Cheren, Stacey and Bianca were waiting on the audience stands in the thankfully undamaged arena while Whitney and Lenora got ready for the first battle of the day.

"D'you think we'll finally get to see Whitney's other pok  mon?" asked Bianca.

"Possibly," replied Cheren.

"What other pok  mon?" Stacey enquired.

"The ones other than Durant, of course. Now be quiet. The battle's about to start," said Cheren.

Whitney looked over her shoulder at Durant, glad as always to see the fire in his eyes and the razor-sharp edges of his mandibles and claws. "You ready, mate?" she asked.

Durant nodded.

"Very well, then. Durant, I choose you!" Whitney declared, and Durant strode onto the battlefield, quietly confident as only a metal insect could be.

"Go, Herdier!" shouted Lenora, releasing a brown, furry pok  mon with a cream-coloured moustache and black fur on his back from one of her pok  balls. "This will be the first of three opponents for you, so fight well." Then, without waiting to see if Whitney or Durant had even heard her, she shouted out a command. "Use take down, Herdier!"

"That's another new one! Three new pok  mon in as many days... well, I never!" declared Bianca, retrieving her pok  dex. (It was a fairly long-range pok  dex, so she could scan the herdier from a



distance.)

"Herdier, the loyal dog pokémon and evolved form of lillipup. It is very helpful and loyal," said the pokédex.

"So Lilly could evolve into one of them," Blake commented.

"Indeed. I say, look at that!" cried Cheren, pointing excitedly at the herdier. Durant had just released a flurry of metal claw attacks, all of which had impacted harmlessly on his enemy's fur.

Bianca gasped. "It must have armoured fur! Hey, pokédex, can you add a bit about Herdier's armoured fur to its pokédex entry?"

"I certainly shall," replied the pokédex. "How's this sound? Herdier, the loyal dog pokémon and evolved form of lillipup. It is very helpful and loyal, and the black fur on its back can deflect attacks."

"That'll do," conceded Bianca.

"Excuse me, shouldn't you be sort of, y'know, watching the battle?" Stacey suggested.

"What?! Well..." Cheren looked to Blake for reassurance, and finding none, went on. "The thing is, we're on a mission to catalogue every pokémon in Unova."

"Then just ask Lenora to tell you about her pokémon after the battle. I mean, honestly, she's got that watchog on the ropes now!"

"Watchog?! But she was..." Bianca trailed off, as she, Blake and Cheren came to the realisation that Durant was now fighting Watchog, and he had just won.

"Let's shut up and watch the battle," Blake proposed.

Sighing deeply, Lenora recalled Watchog. "It wasn't your fault, old friend. That durant's something else..." She retrieved another pokéball from her pocket. "You and your durant are a lot more powerful than I was expecting, Whitney, so there's been a bit of a change of plan. Here's my most powerful pokémon, Kangaskhan!"

Lenora threw the pokéball, and with the customary flash of light, a stocky, fierce-looking pokémon, taller than all but the tallest humans. She was brown and had a thick, pointy tail and muscular hands and feet with three claws apiece, round ears and a cream-coloured pouch on her belly, from which a smaller pokémon could be seen poking her head out. The kangaskhan gently deposited her baby beside Lenora and turned to face Durant.

"SKHAAAAAAN!" the pokémon roared, her belief being that intimidation was the key to a successful battle.

Whitney had heard tales of how fierce a kangaskhan could be, so she decided to play it safe. "Try attack pattern delta, Durant!"

Durant zoomed at the kangaskhan, then swerved to the left and started

circling her at incredible speed. "Once she's thoroughly confused, use metal claw, all right?"

Lenora chuckled. "Fake out," she ordered, and Kangashkan pounced on Durant, smashing him between her mighty claws. He reeled back in terror.

"Fake out always hits and makes the enemy flinch, but it can only be used once in a battle. Pass it on," Cheren whispered to Blake.

Whitney bit her lip. "Oh, this will never do. Use iron head!" Durant's head glowed steely grey, and recovering quickly from the fake out, he headbutted Kangaskhan in the pouch. In response, she punched him several times with all the force and vigour of a comet.

"Oh, no!" gasped Whitney, as Durant collapsed limply to the floor. She ran over and gathered him up in her arms, giving Kangaskhan a dirty look in the process, and carried him carefully over to the audience stands.

"Durant doesn't have a poké-ball, so can you look after him, please?" she asked, handing the metallic ant pokémon to Cheren. He was not altogether thrilled to have Durant thrust upon him, but could hardly refuse, so he didn't.

As she returned to the battlefield, Whitney's head was already filling with ideas. The kangaskhan surely had at least one weakness, and she knew just the pokémon to exploit it.

"Duosion, go!" she declared, releasing a white, oval-shaped pokémon with a diamond mouth, two black eyes, a pointy bit at the bottom and two short, stubby arms. He was surrounded by a sphere of transparent green jelly, bulging out slightly on top and to the sides.

"Another one to ask about later, I take it?" Cheren commented.

Duosion's greatest strength by far was his psychic powers, so there was really no question of what to do next. "Use psyshock!" Whitney commanded. Duosion's eyes shone bright purple and, a blast of psychic energy shot towards Kangaskhan.

Lenora's eyes widened. "Get out of the way!" Kangaskhan jumped to the side, but too late, and the psyshock struck her full-on. She staggered momentarily on the brink of unconsciousness, but somehow, be it due to luck or her baby praying for her to be all right, she remained on two feet.

"That's the spirit, Kangaskhan! Now, use crunch!" Lenora commanded.

Whitney knew crunch, being a dark-type attack, would have a terrible effect on Duosion; what's more, he wasn't fast enough to escape. But she wasn't worried. "Light screen," she said calmly, and Duosion raised a shield of solidified light between him and Kangaskhan.

Kangaskhan's eyes widened in terror. It would take strength greater

even than hers to break a light screen, but she was already committed to the crunch, so she couldn't stop herself from slamming into the shield with a loud, decisive thump.

"Finish her off, Duosion!" said Whitney, feeling quite elated. Duosion sent another blast of psychic energy at Kangaskhan, pushing her back towards Lenora. This time, she didn't get up, and the spirals replacing her eyes confirmed that she had fainted.

"I... I don't believe it!" gasped Lenora.

"Really? 'Cause I do! Yippee!" cried Whitney, running over to give Duosion a hug.

"That was quite a match, Whitney, and your pokémon's strength and talent is quite frankly unignorable. To which end, I am proud to present you with the basic badge!" Lenora declared, getting over her disbelief with admirable speed. She handed a rectangular badge consisting of dark, reddish-purple stuff surrounded by gold to Whitney, who accepted it graciously.

"Thank you!" declared Whitney, and she ran over to Durant, who was only now regaining consciousness. "Here it is, Durant: the basic badge, so called because Lenora uses normal-type pokémon! Your sacrifice most definitely wasn't in vain."

"It was a pleasure to see you, Durant and that duosion in action, Whitney, and your victory makes it all the more spectacular. I always knew you had it in you!" said Cheren, giving Whitney a pat on the back.

"So did I," agreed Whitney. She seated herself beside Cheren, accepting Durant back from him. The metallic ant snuggled up to her as only a cold, solid thing could, and Whitney snuggled right back at him.

Lenora cleared her throat. "Who's next, then?"

"Me, I think," Bianca offered.

"That's a fine idea," said Cheren carefully, "but I think perhaps you should watch a bit longer first."

"You think so? That's exactly what my father says every time I want to have a go at something new until it gets too late for me to do it anyway!" Bianca pointed out, "Then again, I never listen to him anyway. I'll wait."

Cheren tried to wrap his head around that, then realised his own expectations had misled him. "All right, fine. I mean, that's exactly what I suggested in the first place. But don't you... aren't you going to... oh, forget it!"

"Does this mean you're up next, Cheren?" asked Lenora, who had never liked waiting.

"No, Blake is," Cheren replied.

"I am?!" cried Blake, realising even as he said it that that was hardly a mature or confident thing to say. "I mean, yes. Yes I

am!"

"Jolly good! Come over and battle me, then. We'll use three pok  mon each as before," Lenora informed Blake.

Blake made his way down onto the battlefield, standing opposite Lenora, and selected a pok  -ball. "Go Lilly!" he declared, releasing the small, furry lillipup.

"Lilli! Lillipup pup!" said Lilly, excited to be involved in a gym battle.

"A lillipup? I'm sorry to disappoint you, but she'll be at a disadvantage," said Lenora, and she released a pok  mon of her own. "Herdier, let's go!"

Herdier materialised in front of her, looking surprisingly chipper for a pok  mon who had just been defeated by Durant.

"I was hoping you'd choose him, actually," Blake commented. "You see, I've heard that a pok  mon can be triggered to evolve by seeing its evolved form."

"Well, that's right, but will a newly-evolved pok  mon really be able to take on my herdier?" Lenora asked him.

"Of course!" replied Blake. He knew Lilly had a great enthusiasm for violence and determination for victory, which would more than make up for her lack of experience, so all that was left to do was to wait for her to evolve. And wait. And wait some more.

"I don't think she is going to evolve, you know," Lenora commented.

Blake looked nervously at Lilly, who was still busy being a lillipup, albeit while sizing up Herdier and growling ferociously. In this case, his only chance, and indeed hers, was to seize the initiative.

"Use bite!" Blake ordered, catching Lenora by surprise. Lilly pounced on Herdier, sinking her well-developed canine teeth into his shoulder. He shrunk back in pain.

Lenora did not look too worried. "Use work up, take down, then crunch!"

Herdier howled at the top of his lungs, getting into a wild, ferocious rage (with some adrenalin thrown in for good measure), then he took a few steps back and rammed Lilly as hard as he could, throwing her across the battlefield. Then came the crunch, as his teeth grew long, black and evil-looking, and he charged at Lilly.

Blake's eyes widened. "Quick, Lilly, get out of the way!"

Lilly leapt to the side just as Herdier's jaws snapped shut on the air where she had previously been, and she rammed him from the side, knocking him over.

"Brilliant!" Blake rejoiced. "Now bite him again!"

Lilly chomped on Herdier's ear, only to be batted aside by his paw. She skidded across the floor in pain, and got to her feet just in time to hear Lenora ordering Herdier to use take down again. Blake shut his eyes, unable to watch the imminent mauling of his pok mon, and after a few seconds became aware of a distinct lack of violent noise. He opened his eyes again and could barely believe what they told him: there was Lilly, watched in amazement by Herdier, glowing with an unearthly light and morphing into a much larger, furrier pok mon. She was evolving into a herdier.

A smile spread slowly across Blake's face. "I knew it! She's evolving!"

"Three cheers for Lilly!" declared Bianca.

Now fully transformed, Lilly glared at Herdier, her muscles throbbing with energy. Now, she would show him the true meaning of-

"Crunch her again," Lenora ordered calmly.

"Oh, no you don't!" Blake declared. "Use take down, assuming you can now that you've evolved!"

Lilly could. The two pok mon rushed at each other, colliding in midair in a flurry of teeth, fur and claws, and especially teeth. For a few moments it looked as if Lilly might actually defeat Herdier, but it was not to be, and once more, she was sent flying.

"Use work up again, Herdier!" Lenora commanded, and Herdier did so, his fury building like a storm or a volcano or something. Lilly clambered laboriously to her feet, awaiting whatever bright idea Blake would come up with.

"Jump over his head and use crunch from behind!" Blake ordered. Lilly ran at Herdier, jumped straight over him, spun around on the tips of her front toes and bit down savagely on Herdier's tail. Herdier staggered, for a moment looking as if he would faint, but he did not.

"Herdier, you've got to get away from that other herdier! Use extremespeed!" Lenora ordered.

"Wait, since when could herdiers learn extremespeed?!" cried Blake. "Oh, it doesn't matter! Hang on to him!"

Herdier zoomed off across the arena, almost running over Lenora's feet in the process, and Lilly hung on to his tail with all her might. Lilly, quickly tiring of this, clambered up onto his back and gave his other ear a jolly good bite. With a final whimper of pain, Herdier fainted.

With a sigh, Lenora recalled Herdier. "That was a brilliant effort, Herdier, just not quite good enough at the end there. You'd better get a few minutes' rest before the next kid challenges us." She looked up at Blake. "That was quite an exciting opening phase, young man. Now let's see how you handle Watchog!" She tossed another pok -ball (which Blake could only assume had some sort of magical healing properties) onto the battlefield, releasing the familiar tall, brown, chubby-cheeked figure of Watchog.

"Watchog! Watch tchog tchog watch watchog!" he declared.

"Lilly, you'd better come back," said Blake, returning Lilly to her poké-ball. Although she didn't look it, he could tell she was tired from her fight against Herdier. Blake selected another poké-ball, quietly confident in its occupier's prowess. "Samantha, I choose you!"

Samantha exploded into existence in all her oshawotty glory, glaring up at Watchog with the keen eye of a warrior.

Blake, having taken Cilan's earlier advice to heart, did not waste any time. "Use focus energy, then razor shell!"

"Osha!" agreed Samantha, drawing upon her qi to give herself a better chance of striking one of her foe's weak spots. Satisfied, she took the cream-coloured shell off her tummy and ran at Watchog.

"Use confuse ray!" Lenora ordered, and Watchog raised his hand, casting forth a ray of confusing purple energy, which Samantha caught on her shell and batter harmlessly aside.

"Waaaaaatch!" Watchog cried, as Samantha's shell raked across his skin. The oshawott somersaulted back away from him, never one to pass up an opportunity to show off.

"Hyper fang!" shouted Lenora. Baring his massive front teeth, Watchog lunged at Samantha.

"Counter him with water gun!" Blake commanded. Samantha spat out a stream of high-pressure water, catching Watchog on the side of the head, deflecting his fangs onto a bit of floor next to her. Furious at being so easily foiled by a mere oshawott, he tossed a handful of sand into Samantha's eyes.

"Good thinking, Watchog! Now use low kick!" ordered Lenora.

"Oshawott! Osha osh!" wailed Samantha, trying to get the sand out of her eyes with little success. Blake grimaced nervously. Pokémon battles were notorious for sudden turnarounds halfway through, and this could be one of them. On the other hand, Samantha was by no means down and out.

"Use water gun on the ground!" Blake yelled. Samantha looked at him like he was crazy: there was a Watchog bearing down on her, and he wanted her to attack the ground?! On the other hand, he had proved surprisingly sensible after establishing that she was a female oshawott called Samantha...

Just as Watchog's foot swept into Samantha, she spewed out another water gun, knocking him off-balance even as she was bowled off her feet. A splash of water managed to reach one of her eyes, clearing the sand out, and she grinned a particularly violent grin: that buck-toothed dimwit was going down.

As if reading her thoughts, Blake mirrored Samantha's grin. "Finish him off with tackle!" Samantha rushed towards Watchog, watched in horror by Lenora, and tackled him clean across the battlefield. He

skidded to a halt just before the wall, unconscious.

Blake was euphoric. "We did it, Samantha! Just one more poké-mon to go!"

Lenora glared at him. "No need to rub it in, matey-boy-miladdo..." She cleared her throat, selecting a third and final poké-ball once she'd made sure Watchog wasn't especially badly hurt. "Your poké-mon aren't powerful enough to face Kangaskhan just yet, so here's an alternative. Audino, go!"

"Osha?!" said Samantha in disbelief, as the cute, cuddly figure of an audino materialised in front of her, looking cute and cheerful as always.

"The thing about Audino is she only knows two attacks," Lenora informed Blake, Samantha and anyone else paying attention.

Blake gave her a sideways look. "Two attacks? There's a catch, isn't there?"

"Yep!" said Lenora breezily.

"Okay... Samantha, use razor shell!" Blake ordered. Samantha slashed the audino, sending her staggering back in pain. Cuteness was no protection when you were dealing with Samantha.

"Growl!" Lenora commanded. Audino growled furiously at Samantha, and in spite of herself, the tomboyish oshawott found her strength being slightly lowered.

"Don't let her get to you, Samantha! Water gun!" shouted Blake, reasoning that, if there was a catch, it was probably best to injure Audino as much as possible before she revealed what the catch was. Samantha expectorated (look it up) a stream of water as before, soaking Audino's fur and pushing her back towards Lenora.

"Now Audino, last resort!" ordered Lenora.

Blake turned pale. Last resort did not sound good.

"Auuuu...diiii... NOOOOOOOOOO!" shouted Audino, hurling a sphere of blindingly bright energy at Samantha. She gasped in horror before being knocked off her feet into the wall, and when the smoke and residual energies cleared, she was as unconscious as an oshawott could be.

"Samantha, how...? What was that?!" demanded Blake, recalling Samantha into her poké-ball.

"That was last resort, an attack that can only be used once a poké-mon has used all of its moves at least once during a battle," Lenora explained. "Handy, isn't it?"

"I'll say..." said Blake, both sourly and slightly overawed. He pondered his remaining poké-mon: Darkblade was also an audino, and not all that good in a fight. Lyoko still wasn't prepared to listen to orders. That left Patrick and Lilly, both of whom were reasonable choices, but on balance, it was probably best to send Lilly out again, so he did so?

"You can use work up now, right?" asked Blake, as soon as Lilly had materialised.

"Herd herdier," Lilly confirmed.

"Good. Use work up, and be prepared to evade things!" Blake ordered, and Lilly howled furiously at the ceiling. Adrenalin coursed through her veins like a strength-boosting hormone, which is pretty much what it was, and she had a newfound gleam in her eyes.

"Last resort!" Lenora commanded. Audino readied another ball of light and hurled it at Lilly, but the herdier was ready, and leapt easily out of the way. Seizing the initiative, she pounced on Audino and bit down savagely on her leg, only to bear the full brunt of a strength-diminishing growl.

Lenora was by now seriously worried. "Last resort, and make it a good one!"

"Get behind her and use take down!" Blake countered. Audino prepared a third last resort attack, while Lilly, feeling quietly confident, rushed around behind her enemy. Audino spun round and threw the last resort at Lilly, catching her right on the moustache and knocking her back across the arena, with a cloud of dust for added drama.

"Oh, no! Poor Lilly!" Bianca gasped, getting into the spirit of things.

"Dier herd! HERDIER!" roared Lilly, leaping out of the dustcloud, barely hanging onto consciousness and not giving two hoots. Audino's eyes widened as Lilly slammed into her belly, knocking her head-over-heels.

"Audino audi..." groaned Audino, then she fainted.

"Herdier!" Lilly gasped. She had never heard an audino use such language before!

"Holy magikarps, we did... you did... you and... you, me and Samantha did it!" cried Blake. Lilly jumped for joy, while Lenora reassured Audino that it wasn't her fault; the last resort strategy was notoriously unreliable.

"Well, young master Stormheart, you have quite a talent, as well as fierce pokÃ©mon. You most certainly deserve this badge," declared Lenora, retrieving another basic badge from her pocket and throwing it over to Blake. He caught it, and thanks to Whitney's prior tuition, managed to pin it to his jacket.

"Thank you!" said Blake, it being the only thing he could think to say. He had prepared an acceptance speech last night, but in all the excitement, he'd forgotten it. "Two badges already... who'd've thought it?"

"Herd herdier!" Lilly chuckled.

Blake glared at her. "What do you mean, hardly anyone?!"

\* \* \*



><p>Unfortunately, there are only so many hours in a day, and only so many words in a chapter; while the next three gym battles were all as exciting, dramatic and spectacular as anything that came before, I rather feel it is time to move on. Suffice it to say that Stacey achieved a landslide victory, Bianca just about scraped through, and as for Cheren, I think it's best for you to hear it straight from him.<p>

"Cheren's log, supplemental: this really isn't that important to me. ...I mean, what's it all in aid of? In the end, gym badges are just... they're shiny bits of metal and... other stuff. Why bother? I mean, Snivy and I love each other... Pidove and Lillipup are jolly good chaps, Pidove's about ready to evolve... nothing else matters. It's all just a bother. Bothersome. Botheringly... how many words are there with "bother" in them, anyway? Can't be too many... Anyway, there's no real meaning behind anything. The bond my pokÃ©mon and I share is all that matters. Gym badges and all that stuff are just that... just a load of botheriness."

Blake gave the bathroom door a gentle tap. "Cheren, are you all right in there?"

Cheren jumped. "Er... fine, fine!"

"It's just... you've been in there for half an hour, and this is quite a busy pokÃ©mon centre," said Blake.

"Oh, no, it's all good. I'm all shipshape and Bristol fashion," Cheren assured him.

Blake was not quite prepared to believe that. "You're not moping, are you?"

"Look, Blake, I don't bother you when you're having a call of nature, do I?!" snapped Cheren.

"Okay, sorry!" said Blake resignedly, making his way back to the room he and his friends shared.

\* \* \*

><p>"Well? Is Cheren all right?" asked Whitney, as soon as Blake's shoes touched the room's creamy yellow carpet.<p>

"Not really," replied Blake, with an element of sadness in his voice.

"Poor Cheren... you'd think he could cope with losing a bit better, wouldn't you?" asked Bianca.

"Not really," Stacey piped up. "The way I see it, Cheren is reasonably competent, but he greatly fears his own lack of exceptionality. His brash, leaderly, traditionally masculine behaviour is a form of compensation, but when his strategies fail, he crumbles. You see, Cheren, rather than associating his victories with hard work and passion, has misinterpreted his own self-esteem. He wholeheartedly believes himself to be a genius, and when he is proven wrong, he can't cope. The knowledge that you three care about him no matter what would help: what Cheren needs now is, not to put too fine

a point on it, a shoulder to cry on."

Blake and Bianca stared at her.

"Golly! You're a genius!" declared Whitney.

"More to the point, not that I'm ungrateful or anything, but what are you doing in our quarters?" asked Blake.

"I invited her," replied Whitney. "She's a brilliant strategist, great conversation, artistic, clever..."

"Oh, stop it, you!" said Stacey, blushing slightly.

"Oh. I see. Well, you're a budding psychologist, are you, Stacey?" asked Blake.

"That's right," replied Stacey. "Tell me, did Cheren get along well with his parents? Only it might not be so much a hatred of losing as fear of how they'll react."

Blake pondered this. "Do you know, I really don't know..."

"He hardly ever invited us to his house," Bianca informed Stacey. "Although I once overheard his dad doing karaoke..."

"I think they just have a normal sort of child-parent relationship," Blake decided.

After that, there was little else to say or do.

"What are we going to do with the rest of the day, then?" asked Whitney, after a short while. "I mean, if Cheren's determined to mope, there's no point in us staying here and worrying about him."

"What are you talking about? We can't just leave him to it," Bianca pointed out. "Cheren's a sensitive chap deep down inside, so we need to do what Stacey suggested."

Blake could see the sense in her words. Something needed to be done about Cheren, and the beginnings of an idea were forming in his head; if it went well, it might even deal with his guilt complex over not having been especially friendly to Cheren beforehand.

"Cheren's sad, right?" Blake commented, being careful not to force the idea out before it was ready.

"Yes, we've established that," Whitney confirmed.

"And ideally, he should get over it," Blake went on.

"That's right," agreed Bianca.

"So... it's our responsibility as three of his friends and one orange-haired girl he just met--"

"I'm sorry, what?!" Stacey interrupted.

"--to help him get over his depression, correct?" Blake reasoned,

gently drawing the idea out into the light of day.

Bianca gave Blake a sideways look. "What are you getting at?"

"I am getting," said Blake, "at the idea," he continued, "that I," he went on, "should make Cheren a cake to cheer him up."

Whitney and Stacey all but passed out from exasperation, and Bianca's eyes widened in excitement.

"That's it?!" demanded Whitney. "All that build-up for a cake?!"

"I can think of nothing more deserving!" declared Bianca, mistaking her sarcasm for candour.

"Blake, even if Cheren likes the cake, he'll probably be too proud to admit it," Whitney pointed out.

"You've never really sampled my cooking before, have you?" Blake asked her.

"No," replied Whitney.

"Well then!" said Blake, with an air of finality. "I'd better get to work."

\* \* \*

><p>One cake later, Cheren, Blake, Samantha, Snivy, Templeton, Bianca, Durant, Whitney, Duosion, Weezing (Whitney's third pokÃ©mon), Lilly, Patrick, Lyoko, Darkblade, George, Claribelle, Pidove, Lillipup, Stacey and all of Stacey's pokÃ©mon were seated around one of the pokÃ©mon centre's outdoor tables, the Sun's beautiful, mid-sunset rays lending them all an orangey glow. The Nurse Joy had been reluctant to let Blake use the pokÃ©mon centre's cooking facilities, right up until he revealed he had plenty of ingredients with him, and promised her and her audino a share of the cake.<p>

"Was it tasty?" asked Bianca expectantly.

"You should know, considering you ate twice your share," Cheren pointed out. In spite of his exasperation at Bianca's appetite, he was feeling a lot more cheerful: his team- no, his partners- no, his friends, or just generally the people he knew, cared deeply about him, having all participated in making the cake in their own special way. What with all the people, pokÃ©mon and mystical healing spirits around, the portions of cake had not been especially large, but it was the thought that counted.

"You're right, I do know," Bianca conceded, "but I want to hear what you make of the cake. Get it? Make of the cake?! Hahahahaha!"

"It was delicious," said Cheren, with a smile.

"While we're on the subject," said Blake, "what was all that about pokÃ©mon training being bothersome?"

"Oh, nothing! It was merely my emotions talking, and they rarely have anything interesting to say," replied Cheren.

"You may think that," Stacey piped up, "but actually, emotions are a more accurate representation of one's innermost thoughts than many people believe. Most sentient beings can experience emotions before they are consciously aware of them, and when they eventually realise they have these emotions, they have no idea how to deal with them. Think of emotions as a country's overall political opinions. We hear about them before the government decide what to say or do, and..."

"She really doesn't know when to stop, does she?" said Cheren wearily.

## 9. Chapter 9: Pinwheel Forest

**\*\*~Chapter Nine: N Breaks Out and Venipedes Happen~\*\***

It was, as often seems to be the case nowadays, a fine morning in Nacrene City. Last night's cake had left our heroes in high spirits, so they were feeling confident and really looking forward to a few days (or maybe weeks) in Pinwheel Forest. All six of them.

"Cheren, shouldn't we be a bit more worried about Stacey?" asked Blake, as the group made their way through the western exit of Nacrene City, waved off by Talbot, Sandy and that other girl whose name still remains unconfirmed.

Cheren gave him a funny look. "Worried? Why?"

"Well, she appeared out of nowhere, and now we're travelling together," Blake elaborated.

"Like Whitney did? I fail to see the problem," said Cheren.

"Well, it's just..." Blake broke off, realising he was being a trifle paranoid. Really, how could Stacey be any kind of threat? She and Whitney really seemed to have hit it off, which was a given, seeing as how they were both avid battle strategists. Then again, they did seem to spend an unusual amount of time gazing into each other's eyes, and Blake wouldn't be surprised if the phrase "limpid pools of starlight" began cropping up from time to time...

Pinwheel Forest turned out to be a fairly typical forest: lots of trees, leaf litter on the ground, lots of bug-type pokémon, sunlight filtering lazily down through the leaves... To Whitney and Durant, however, it was the promised land. Whitney was skipping along, kicking up piles of leaves and squelching in all the muddiest bits. Durant, who was normally one of the most stoical pokémon in the world, was gambolling around like Bianca.

"Hey! I resent that!" Bianca complained.

Fine. He was gambolling around like a pachirisu. Happy?

"That's better," said Bianca, clearly satisfied.

"What's better?" asked Cheren, giving her a funny look.

"Um... nothing, nothing! Not a thing!" said Bianca innocently.

"This seems like a good place to make camp," commented Whitney, as the group wandered into a relatively flat area, past which a rough, foamy stream was flowing down a mini-waterfall.

"You're the expert on these matters," Cheren conceded. "Now, who brought the tents?"

An icicle of fear stabbed at Blake's heart. (Well, not really, but that's what he said when I interviewed him.) Tents? Cheren was supposed to bring the tents! He could see worry in Bianca, Whitney and Stacey, too, and Durant had stopped gambolling; was this to be the end of their camping trip, so soon after it had begun?

"Ah. Aha. I can see by your looks of fear and trepidation that you have all forgotten one of the main details of our trip: I brought the tents," declared Cheren, removing two tents from his backpack. Blake, Whitney and Stacey breathed a synchronised sigh of relief.

"But now that we're on the subject," Cheren went on, "who brought the table and chairs?"

All eyes turned to Blake.

"Er... I thought we could just sit on the ground," said Blake, slightly nervously. "I mean, who needs tables? We're camping!"

"Too right! He's got his head screwed on right and no mistake!" said Whitney, giving Blake a smile.

"You are free to dine off the ground if you wish, but a true gentleman never eats from any surface not specifically designed for that express purpose," said Cheren superciliously. "I shall just have to carve a table out of a boulder or something. Now, who fancies putting the tents up?"

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, in a prison cell somewhere in Nacrene City, N and Fraxure were not having a good time of it.<p>

"How can they do this?! I am the bringer of light, the Hero of Ideals, sworn to free all pokÃ©mon from slavery, and what happens when I try and do some good? I get beaten up and thrown in prison!" N complained.

"\_N, technically you did launch yourself at some people in a blind rage, having previously instigated an attack on the museum, library and gym,\_" Fraxure pointed out.

"The pokÃ©mon in Nacrene City gym are systematically abused, beaten up, treated in the most degrading way... who wouldn't want to destroy it?!" demanded N. "If the public can't see the evil they sanction day by day, that's not my problem."

"\_True enough. However, the fact remains that, according to the laws of Unova, attacking a public building to steal the skull of an ancient pokÃ©mon is a crime. In future, may I suggest a little more tact, delicacy and secretiveness on our part?\_" Fraxure persisted.

N scoffed. "Tact? Secrecy?! If we are to change the world, people need to see what the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation are doing. If we come like assassins in the night, with purrlain-like tread and breath as quiet as snow, no-one will understand what we're doing! As is, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will soon be in every newspaper, radio broadcast and internet feed in Unova, bringing knowlege of our good work to the eyes and ears of everybody. In time, we'll be a household name, and the pokÃ©mon league will be a thing of the past!"

Fraxure sighed. N was brilliant, sure, and one of the few people who cared about pokÃ©mon's rights, but he was also incredibly stubborn. If he had decided on a course of action, it would take no less than a direct meteor strike to convince him to change his mind; and even then, it had better be a big meteor.

"Listen, Fraxure, I understand how you feel about this. If you want to fight evil in secret, that's fine, but I won't be doing it with you. As soon as we escape from this prison, you're free to change the world by whatever means you deem necessary," said N. Fraxure had not been expecting that, but it was a pleasant surprise. He could easily see himself freeing abused pokÃ©mon right from under the noses of their masters: really, that was the best way to liberate just about anything.

"In the meantime," N went on, examining the stout iron bars crisscrossing the window, "do you think you could remove these bars?"

Fraxure examined the bars for a moment. "\_Probably not.\_"

"I see. What about the door?"

"\_I very much doubt it. Besides, they're got ice-type pokÃ©mon guarding the door. Even if I could break out, I wouldn't stand a chance.\_"

At the mention of ice-type pokÃ©mon, N perked up. "PokÃ©mon, you say? No humans?" He peeked through the window in the door of the cell, and sure enough, two cryogonals with police helmets perched carefully on the tops of their bodies were guarding the cell. Nothing else. The metre-wide, snowflake-themed pokÃ©mon hovered impassively to either side of the door, but there was no doubting their attentiveness: few things could pay attention like a cryogonal.

"If these are pokÃ©mon, there's a chance they might see things our way," said N. He cleared his throat. "Excuse me, o fair, bluish-white pokÃ©mon of ice, are you satisfied with your jobs?"

"\_Of course we are! We get hats, honour, all the ice cream we can eat...\_" said one cryogonal happily.

"\_Plus we get to fight criminals like you, if you ever feel like escaping,\_" the other cryogonal elaborated.

"But... don't you want to get paid?" asked N.

"\_Not really. What would we do with the money?\_" asked the second cryogonal.

"Well... buy food and clothes, and... a car?" suggested N, who was

beginning to realise he may not have thought things through properly.

"\_We don't need clothes or cars, and as my sister said, we are given food,\_" the first cryogonal pointed out.

"No, look, doesn't it rankle a bit, being dependant on the rozzers for food?" asked N meekly.

"\_Not really. Besides, we're hardly dependant, per se. There's no shortage of weak, herbivorous pokÃ©mon out there to turn into ice lollies,\_" the first cryogonal replied.

N had had enough. "Look, do you even want to be liberated?!"

"\_Liberated from what?\_" asked the second cryogonal. "\_Adventures? Fighting? Ice cream?\_"

"They... they think this is all a game," said N, in a small voice. "I mean... fighting isn't supposed to be fun!"

"\_I hate to break this to you, N, but it kind of is, at least if you're a pokÃ©mon,\_" Fraxure informed N.

N gave him a look. "Some P.L.A.S.M.A agent you are..."

"\_To be honest, I only joined up to deal with abusive pokÃ©mon trainers. I don't believe we should punish the entire human race,\_" retorted Fraxure.

"Then you're fired!" snapped N. "As for the two of you, you'll see how fun fighting is when those in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation who have their heads screwed on right come and bust me out of here!"

The second cryogonal chuckled. "\_Really, I doubt that's going to happen any time soon. You see, not only is this prison designed to keep criminals inside, it's also designed to keep would-be rescuers out. Really, why did you think there was a moat of lava around it? The only rescue you'll be getting is-\_"

There was a loud, perfectly-timed explosion. When the smoke cleared, both cryogonals were lying dazed on the ground, and Melissa was standing amid the debris, looking immensely proud of herself.

"Hi, N," she said breezily. "How's things?"

"Now that you're here, they've never been better!" declared N. "Tell me, who else is with you?"

"Just me and Heidi," replied Melissa.

"Who?" asked N.

"Heidi the hydreigon. Ghetsis recruited her," Melissa elaborated. "She's here to rescue you, as am I. Come on!"

"\_Just to be clear, am I coming with you?\_" asked Fraxure.

"Of course you are!" declared Melissa, cutting N off before he had a

chance to say anything. "Now, I really think we should be going."

\* \* \*

><p>"So," said Cheren, "we've determined that a venipede's bite injects a potent poison, not lethal, but powerful enough to paralyse the avian pokÃ©mon which prey on it, as well as anyone else foolish or unlucky enough to invite its anger."<p>

"Oh, whoop-de-doo! That makes it all worthwhile!" snapped Blake, who was lying paralysed on the ground beside him. Samantha and Servine (formerly Snivy, thanks to Cheren's training regime) were just about managing to restrain the violent, red-shelled bug pokÃ©mon, but he looked as if he would break free any minute.

"We all have to make sacrifices, Blake," said Cheren superciliously. "In the name of science, many people and pokÃ©mon have been wounded or even killed. If you can't take a little bite from a venomous pokÃ©mon, you might as well go back home and crawl under your bed. On the other hand..."

Cheren plucked a berry from a nearby tree.

"I think this chesto berry should cure your paralysis," he informed Blake, inserting the berry into the latter's mouth. Blake chewed thoughtfully, reflecting as his limbs regained feeling that Cheren was both a complete git and a helpful, knowledgeable chap all rolled into one.

Cheren began typing into his pokÃ©dex. "Now... do you think "brutally aggressive" would be a good descriptor for the venipede?"

"Venipede! Veni! VENIIIIIIII!" the venipede screeched, thrashing about between Servine and Samantha in a blind fury.

"I'd say it's pretty accurate," said Blake levelly, adjusting his hat. "Samantha, if he gets too much for you, use razor shell on him, all right?"

"Osha oshawott!" said Samantha, indicating that the venipede was already too much for her. So saying, she removed the shell from her tummy and, firmly gripping the venipede's antennae in her free paw, lamped him one. The venipede was sent flying, skittering across the forest floor on his back before running away in terror.

"A jolly good team effort," said Cheren approvingly, failing to note that neither he nor Servine had really done anything. "Now, let's go and see if Bianca, Whitney and Stacey have finished surveying the river pokÃ©mon. I have a feeling-" Cheren broke off, glancing skittishly around at the surrounding trees and undergrowth.

"What's wrong?" asked Blake.

"Nothing," replied Cheren. "I just had this feeling-"

A tree fell. Then another. By the time the third tree fell, Blake, Servine, Samantha and Cheren were running for their lives, but not before Blake had seed the tide of venipedes surging furiously towards them.



"That was kind of inevitable, wasn't it?" Blake commented, once he, Cheren and the two pok  mon had got to safety at the top of a large, venipede-proof tree.

"A bit," Cheren conceded, busying himself describing the venipedes' swarming techniques to his pok  dex.

"Tell me, do you think they were trying to punish us for mistreating that venipede?" Blake suggested.

"They may have been," replied Cheren. "In which case, our only course of action is to defeat every last one of them."

"Shouldn't we try negotiating with them or something?" asked Blake.

Cheren scoffed. "As if! A venipede can be quieted by nothing short of being knocked out."

"Cheren... you're talking about a whole forest's worth of venipedes. Can we really fight that many? And even if we could, it wouldn't be right, would it?" Blake pointed out.

"How wouldn't it be right? We're pok  mon trainers, they're pok  mon... how else are we to grow more powerful?" asked Cheren. Then, noticing the look in Blake's eyes, he went on, "I know what you're thinking, Blake: I'm a heartless, exploitative blackguard determined to profit off the blood, sweat and tears of innocent pok  mon. Well, fine, but I'm not losing to any more gym leaders!"

"This... this is about Lenora, isn't it?" Blake guessed, silently cursing himself for not putting enough chocolate powder in the cake.

"Correct. Lenora defeated me, and in losing, I brought shame upon the House of McTavish."

"What are you talking about?! This isn't The Lord of the Rings or anything! You're not a samurai!" Blake protested.

"Wrong! As the eldest son of the House of McTavish, I am a samurai, like my great-great-great-great-great grandmother before me!" snapped Cheren, bringing his walking stick to bear. "Cone, Servine! For the honour of Nuvema Town!"

Blake looked on with a mix of horror and fascination as Cheren leapt out of the tree, his slightly perforated cape billowing out behind him, and fell flat on his face. Servine landed with graceful ease, despite having taken on a legless, snake-like form following her evolution, and tried to help Cheren up.

"We'd better intervene..." said Blake quietly, and, as his mother had managed to teach him in spite of his lack of martial arts prowess, he clambered nimbly down the tree, depositing Samantha at his feet. He took a quick look at the venipedes surrounding him, Samantha, Cheren and Servine: there were at least two thousand, all of them angry. He gulped.

"Listen, venipedes, we're sorry about what happened to one of you,"

said Blake, as peacefully as he could. He had seen enough films to know that the best way to avert nature's wrath was with humility. "It was for research, not so we could kill him and eat him or anything. As for Cheren, he's a bit off in the head," Blake went on, as Cheren staggered to his feet, remained there for about two seconds, and almost fell on Servine.

"Veni?" said one of the venipedes curiously.

"Venipede ven!" snapped one of her companions.

"Pede veni veni!" agreed a third venipede.

"Oshawott osha wott wott..." said Samantha worriedly.

"Samantha... are they buying it?" asked Blake anxiously. Samantha shook her head.

"Then it is as I said. We must fight," Cheren decided. "We must not let them reach the river!"

"The others can take care of themselves, Cheren," Blake pointed out. "But you're right: we shouldn't drag anyone else into this, should we? I mean, one person's stupid and badly thought-out actions shouldn't make work for anyone else, such as, for example, having to help him fight off a horde of venipedes. By which I mean... well, I couldn't very well not tell Samantha to use razor shell, could I?!"

"True," Cheren conceded. "She could have used tackle, water gun, or maybe even water pulse. Focus energy might also have been enough to convince the venipede not to cause any trouble."

"Actually, now that I think of it, maybe one of us should challenge the leader of the venipedes to single combat. That way, we-"

"The time for talking is over, Blake!" Cheren interrupted him.

Blake glanced at the horde of venipedes. "They seem quite happy to wait for us..."

"Piffle! They're simply trying to lure us into a false sense of security. Servine, use seed bomb!" Cheren ordered.

\_Oh, my Arceus, he's nuts...\_ Blake silently reflected, as Servine gathered up a ball of explosive seeds in her arms. Surely this wasn't the right way to deal with the venipedes! Surely what they needed to do was make a gesture of solidarity, and...

Suddenly it hit him. This was bound to work! "Samantha, intercept the seed bomb!" Blake commanded. Samantha raised an eyebrow, then cottoned on and leapt into the path of the seed bomb, batting it aside with her battle-shell.

Cheren shot Blake a murderous look. "What are you playing at?!"

"Earning the venipede swarm's trust," replied Blake, "and I daresay it worked!"

Cheren stared in disbelief at the scene before him: the venipedes were holding Samantha aloft as a hero.

"What...? I mean, how...?! They were stampeding!" Cheren blustered.

"They were," Blake agreed, "but that's the thing: bug-type pokémon tend to have lots of mood swings."

"Really?" asked Cheren, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, no," Blake admitted, "but how else do you explain it?"

Cheren thought for a moment. "No idea. Now, if there is no further ado, which there had better not be, or else, we had better--"

"Oshawott! Osha oshawott wott!" Samantha cried. Blake and Cheren looked over to see that the venipedes, having finished celebrating Samantha, were now eyeing Servine up...

\* \* \*

><p>Bianca, meanwhile, was warm and dry. Thanks to the chest waders she had packed at her father's behest, the cold, knee-deep waters of the river gave her no trouble as she filled in her pokémon's entry on frillish. "Boy frillish are blue, but girl frillish are pink, which probably inspired a lot of pointlessly sexist human fashion. Frillish love to play in the water and give people cuddles, which is nice, because their tentacles are so soft and cuddly. They generally live a long way under the sea, but can sometimes be found in rivers, presumably so pokémon trainers can catch them," she typed, muttering it to herself as she typed.<p>

"Is that all, Floella?" Bianca asked, addressing the newly inhabited poké-ball in her bag. Inside it, Floella, a young, vibrant frillish, indicated that that was indeed all.

"That's it, then," said Bianca. "We've investigated the river."

"Basculin, frillish, tympoles, tynamos... This is quite a river," commented Stacey.

"I know. Why'd you think I love this forest so much?" Whitney pointed out. "Speaking of which, who's up for a mud fight?!"

"I am," Bianca replied, "although it might not really be fair like this, seeing as how I'm so covered up." So saying, she climbed out of her chest waders, deposited them and her bag on the ground, and without warning, retrieved some mud from the riverbank and threw it at Whitney. They fell upon one-another, laughing with delight and sending mud flying in every direction.

"You two are nuts..." Stacey sighed. "To be precise, you're 23.652% more nuts than a hazelnut tree, or approximately half as nuts as someone completely mad."

Durant gave a complicated squeak, indicating that, while Whitney was probably not nuts, he wasn't that fond of mud either. It causes

rust.

With nothing more to say, the very precise girl and the metallic antpokémon retreated to a safe distance, and Stacey was about to retrieve her pocket radio to check the weather forecast when Cheren and Blake barrelled past her, with Samantha and Servine in tow.

"What in the name of-?!" The words had scarcely left Stacey's mouth when a tide of venipedes bowled her off her feet, running over, around and even underneath her. She screamed, then, chiding herself for being so stereotypical, clambered up onto a treestump to watch the proceedings, while Durant sat calmly amid the swarming insects.

Blake dived into the river, followed by Samantha, then by Servine, and finally a rather reluctant Cheren, silently marvelling at how it had become so churned-up and muddy.

"Are you here to join in?" asked Whitney, as the two caught their breath amid the swampy waters.

"Not... as such," Blake panted. "We're being chased... venipedes... lots of venipedes!" He had not been expecting to see Whitney or Bianca so covered in mud, but given the circumstances, he couldn't care less.

The same could not be said for Cheren. "And just what... are the two... of you... playing at?!" he demanded. "I mean, really... a mud fight?! We're scientists... on a mission of... discovery... with far-reaching impacts... and-"

"Oh, my Arceus, they're coming!" Blake cried, gesturing to the oncoming tide of red chitin and yellow eyes, now descending the gentle slope to the river.

"There are so many of them! What do we do?!" cried Bianca.

"Hide under the water?" asked Whitney, taking a deep breath and lowering herself down onto the riverbed.

"Don't see why not," agreed Blake, and he did likewise. The river was only knee-deep, but the mud beneath yielded to him easily, providing ample cover from the venipedes. Samantha, too, was beneath the surface, her watery powers allowing her to breathe the river water as if it was air, and Servine could survive without air for a short while as long as she had sunlight. There was a slight risk that neither Blake nor any of his human friends could hold their breaths long enough, but they had to try. And try. And try some more. And continue to try. And come up for air, only to see a horde of venipedes still surrounding the river.

"Okay. What happened to make the venipedes so angry, exactly?" asked Whitney.

"It was Blake's fault. In a classic example of reckless stupidity, he ordered Samantha to attack an innocent venipede whom we were examining, thereby incurring the wrath of the entire population," Cheren replied.

"What?! All I did was-"

"And then, in an attempt to rectify the situation, he deliberately painted my poor, dear servine as the enemy of the venipedes, leading them to make an attempt on her life. I, of course, defended her, earning us once more the ire of the venipede swarm, and, well, here we are," Cheren continued.

"What are you talking about?! I was trying to make sure you didn't do anything rash!" Blake snapped. "You were talking about fighting every venipede in the forest, and then you were going on about making your pokémon more powerful at all costs. I mean, talking like that, you might as well sign up with Team Rocket."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait... every venipede?" asked Whitney, scarcely believing her ears.

"Of course. You cannot fight one venipede without the whole swarm coming down on you like a ton of bricks, therefore, if we are ever to get out of this river, we must defeat the entire swarm," Cheren reasoned.

"Cheren, that's crazy!" Whitney declared.

"I concur. It would take hours!" agreed Bianca.

"Not to mention it would be genocide," Blake pointed out.

"Genocide, my foot. It would merely be self-defence. A lot of self-defence, I'll admit, but-"

"Shut up," Whitney reasoned. "Bianca, your dad packed you a flash grenade, right?"

"Actually, the flash grenade was my idea," Bianca corrected her, "but even so, it's in my bag, and that's over there."

"Well, it's a good thing not all of us are being chased by the venipedes. Hey, Durant, can you get me Bianca's flash grenade?" Whitney requested.

Durant nodded, emerging from amid the venipedes to make his way over to Bianca's bag and waders, treading carefully between the insects. He rummaged around in the bag for a moment, eventually revealing a small, portable flash grenade, which he gripped carefully between his mandibles as he carried it over to the river and deposited it in Whitney's hands.

"Now, listen carefully," said Whitney. "Venipedes are easily startled, so this grenade should snap them out of their fury, as well as creating a distraction so we can get out of the river. Once that happens, we'll need to make them understand that we're not enemies."

"I see," said Cheren. "I still believe my plan would be better, however."

"In what way better?" Whitney asked.

"Well, it would..." Cheren trailed off. How \_would \_it be better?

He'd been so busy arguing with Blake, running for his life and getting wet, he'd completely forgotten!

"Now, when the grenade flashes, don't run or panic or attack the venipedes; just stroll nonchalantly out of the river and go somewhere else," Whitney instructed her companions, as she removed the pin from the flash grenade.

"Do you think this will work?" Blake asked Bianca.

"Well..." said Bianca.

"Here we go!" said Whitney loudly, and she threw the grenade into the air. It exploded, releasing a burst of light so bright Blake was dazzled even though his eyes were closed. Whitney took Cheren by the hand, who took Samantha by the hand, who took Blake by the hand, who took Bianca by the hand, who took Servine by the hand, who took Durant by the antenna, and they stepped carefully out of the river, amid the now seriously confused venipedes.

"I think it worked," said Blake quietly.

"Of course it did! It was Whitney's idea," said Stacey, stepping carefully off her treestump. Whitney turned a fetching shade of red, although it wasn't that easy to notice amid her many freckles.

"Now," Cheren declared, "we have two main priorities: first, have a bath, and second-

"Make sure the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation never finds out about this?" Bianca suggested.

Cheren blinked. "That's exactly what I was going to say!"

## 10. Chapter 10: Castelia City

**\*\*~Chapter Ten: The Myriad Wonders of Castelia City~\*\***

The Sun rose over the carpet of foliage, illuminating the track rising out of the forested valley, as five children and one pok mon made their leisurely way over the hill. From on high, a gentle, fatherly voice gave context to the scene:

"After a narrow victory against Team Helicopter, our heroes are feeling confident about their next hopscotch tourn-"

"Bianca, switch that off. It'll rot your brain," said Cheren superciliously, pausing in the act of tying his shoelaces.

Bianca made no move towards switching the television off. "Cheren, you spent five hours watching Star Trek last night."

"That's... that's different! Star Trek is high-minded, morally upstanding, mind-expanding stuff, and that hopscotch affair is just a children's programme!" said Cheren defensively.

"Well, let's take a look at the TV guide, shall we?" said Blake, retrieving the guide from on top of the televisual box. He spent a

moment locating the entries for Star Trek. "Episode 13: everyone except the captain is turned into a statue, and he attempts to win back their lives in a pokémon battle tournament. Episode 14: the ship crash-lands on a planet populated by incredibly beautiful women who flirt with everything in sight. Episode 15: the ship becomes infested with snubbulls."

"Oh, yes, real mind-expanding stuff!" Whitney commented sarcastically.

"We do not have the time to discuss the intricacies of a science fiction programme from the 1960s," said Cheren coldly. "Right now, our first order of business is to challenge this city's gym, and see if the leader can tell us anything about his speciali-

"Or we could visit Castelia City's world-famous ice cream shop," Bianca suggested.

"And we might want to check out the battle tower," Blake suggested, cutting Cheren off in mid-rebuttal.

"Oh, great idea! They have a club for battle strategists, don't they?" said Whitney excitedly.

"That should be interesting," agreed Stacey.

"And once we've done that, how about-"

"YOU ARE PERFECTLY WELCOME TO PURSUE WHATEVER COURSE OF ACTION SUITS YOU BEST," said Cheren, extremely loudly, "but I have other plans. I shall away to Pinwheel Forest once more, where I intend to capture a sawk or throh, and then vanquish Lenora. With any luck, I should be back here within the next few days to lead you to Nimbasa City."

"...I'm sorry, you think we can't get to Nimbasa City without you?" asked Whitney, easily getting over her shock at how loud Cheren could be.

Cheren was nonplussed. "Well... I have the best sense of direction, so... yes?"

Whitney scoffed. "We've all got a map in our heads, matey, and the routes just so happen to be well signposted."

"And me and Bianca can handle the pokédexes," Blake added.

"All right, I get the point. I'm not indispensable. Seventy-five per cent of you are competent enough to survive on your own."

"What?!" cried Bianca.

"Nevertheless, I'd rather this be a temporary period of me being elsewhere," Cheren continued. "To be brutally honest, I find your presence relatively pleasant, moreso than being on my own. Not that I really am alone, what with Servine, Pidove and Lillipup."

"I see," said Stacey.

"That's fine," agreed Blake.

"So," said Whitney, "shall we go?"

"Let's go! Let's go!" declared Bianca, who sometimes felt the need to assert herself twice in one go.

"Indeed," Cheren agreed, switching the television off as he passed.

"We'll miss you," Blake informed Cheren, switching it absentmindedly on again.

"You will?!" cried Stacey, switching the television off again and positioning herself in front to make sure no-one switched it on by mistake again.

"Of course they will!" said Cheren confidently.

The buildings of Castelia City rose above the thronging streets like cliffs of steel and glass, adorned with flashing neon signs in the finest Japanese tradition. There were few cars, but lots of pedestrians, cyclists and the occasional flying pokémon. The small group felt seriously overcrowded as they made their way from the pokémon centre, waved a temporary goodbye to Cheren at the gates of the city, and were all but dragged by Bianca to the ice cream shop.

"Have you ever tasted anything so delicious?! I mean, casteliacones are world-famous! If types of ice cream were pokémon, casteliacones would be Arceus!" Bianca declared, having kept up a running commentary as soon as she caught sight of the shop.

"It's not too bad," Blake said noncommittally, taking his time to enjoy his cone of multicoloured, Castelia-esque ice cream, "but it has a bit too much structural integrity. Ice cream should melt on the tongue, not need to be chewed. It has a nice flavour, well balanced between sweetness and creaminess and an excellent mouth-feel, although really, the sprinkles, chocolate sauce, strawberry jam and sugar are all a bit much. Personally, I'd limit it to a couple of toppings, or maybe..." Blake trailed off, realising he was rambling on a little. Goodness knows, they didn't need another Cheren.

"Do you know how to make ice cream, then?" Bianca asked hopefully.

"In theory. I couldn't get my hands on a big enough freezer to make it in Nuvema Town, but if I could capture an ice-type pokémon and get it to help..."

"Yippee!" declared Bianca.

"Moving swiftly on, the battle tower is in the south-west part of the city, next to the docks," said Whitney.

"Got it. What do we do once we're there?" Blake enquired.

"No idea," replied Whitney.

"I'm 78.153% sure it'll be fine, though," said Stacey.



"Then, at the risk of repeating myself, let's go!" said Bianca loudly.

"Go where?" asked one of the innumerable passers-by wandering through the city.

"Not telling," replied Bianca, whose father had instilled in her a healthy(ish) regard for not talking to strangers.

"Is it the battle tower?" the passer-by guessed. "Only, the four of you look a bit like pok mon trainers."

Bianca looked at Whitney. "He's onto us," she muttered urgently.

"Yes, we're going to the battle tower. Please disregard my friend here; she tends to get a little overexcited," said Whitney.

"That's fine. Carry on," said the stranger, and he wandered off.

"Well, you heard the man. On we carry!" declared Blake, and off they went.

\* \* \*

><p>A few minutes later, the group found themselves at the entrance to a towerblock even larger and more perpendicularly accentuated than many of its neighbours, but without many windows. The hallway led into a wide battle arena, surrounded by rows of seats stacked on top of each other. All in all, there were enough chairs for over three thousand humans and human-sized pok mon; still only a tiny fraction of Castelia City's population. For some reason, it was also three thousand more than had turned up.<p>

"That's strange. This is the battle tower, right?" Blake commented, looking around in confusion at the deserted arena. In a distant corner, he could make out the entrance to a staircase, probably leading to whatever was above the arena, but no-one was there.

"Of course. There was a sign over the door which said "battle tower", wasn't there?" asked Whitney.

"Yes, but signs can lie, can't they?" said Blake.

"Of course not! Everyone knows it's sign-writers who lie. Signs aren't clever enough, you silly, childish boy! I mean, really, am I the only person here with two brain cells to rub together?!" Bianca laughed. Blake gave her a sardonic look, to which she replied with a beaming smile.

"Moving swiftly on," said Stacey, "at roughly 328.54% of our usual swiftness (and 264.84% as swiftly as Taylor Swift), I have actually been here before. The audience stands are only used for high-profile tournaments, and when one of them isn't on, anyone's allowed to turn up and utilise the arena."

"Oh, right," said Whitney. "But we're the only people here, so..."

"We'll have a double battle," Blake suggested.

"Sounds good to me. I'm with Stacey," Whitney declared.

"In which case I'm with Whitney," Stacey agreed.

"Meaning my partner is Bianca. Brilliant!" said Blake, and while he may have been being sarcastic, Bianca did not take it that way.

"You mean that?!" cried Bianca.

"Yes. Yes, of course," replied Blake.

"Yay! We're going to have so much fun!" said Bianca euphorically. "Then we can borrow a freezer from one of the appliance shops and you can make ice cream to celebrate and we'll challenge the gym and surprise Cheren with our badges when he comes back and he'll be so amazed and he'll challenge the gym as well and he'll win and he'll learn a valuable moral lesson about not being a snooty-pants and we'll have even more ice cream!"

"I'll look forward to that," said Whitney. "Now, you two go over there." She gestured to the far side of the arena, and Bianca and Blake made their way over.

"HOW SHALL WE DO THIS, THEN?!" Blake asked once he and Bianca had arrived, being quite loud to make sure Whitney and Stacey could hear him. "WILL WE EACH USE ONE POK  MON, TWO, OR WHAT?!"

"WE'LL USE ONE EACH, IF THAT'S ALL RIGHT WITH EVERYONE!" declared Stacey.

"FINE BY ME!" said Whitney.

"I CONCUR!" said Bianca.

"THEN LET'S BEGIN!" shouted Whitney. "Durant, none of their pok  mon are nearly as strong as you are. I choose you!"

Durant nodded, taking up his pre-battle position in front of Whitney.

Bianca selected one of her pok  -balls. "I've said "let's go" three times already in this chapter, and I'm not going to stop any time soon. Templeton, let's go!"

"Tepig tep! Tep tep tepig!" said Templeton, posing dramatically in the afterglow of his pok  -ball.

Whitney cringed. She'd forgotten about Templeton. Fire-types were Durant's biggest weakness.

"Go, Galvantula!" said Stacey loudly, throwing forth one of her pok  -balls. A waist-high, four-legged pok  mon covered in yellow chitin emerged, complete with two small arms, six shiny blue eyes, some blue fur on its large, rear-mounted abdomen, and lots of purple markings. Blake, who had never really liked arachnid pok  mon, gulped.

"Is everything all right, Blake?" Bianca asked worriedly.

"Yes. Fine, fine. Um... HEY, STACEY, YOU KNOW WE ARE TRYING TO FILL OUT SOME POK&DEXES! WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US YOU HAD THAT GALVANTULA?!" Blake enquired.

"YOU NEVER ASKED!" Stacey replied.

For a moment, Blake looked as if he might pass out. Then he calmed down. "Samantha, I choose you!" he declared, releasing Samantha.

"Oshawott wott!" said Samantha, emerging from her pok&-ball.

"Blake, won't Samantha be at a disadvantage against that galvantula?" Bianca asked.

Blake gave her a funny look. "Why?"

"Well, galvantulas are electric-type, so..." Bianca pointed out.

"What? Really?!" cried Blake. Bianca nodded. "Oh, nuts."

Whitney started things off. "Durant, attack pattern alpha!" she ordered, and Durant rushed directly at Samantha.

"Use water gun! Quick!" Blake commanded. Samantha tried, but she had barely built up enough internal pressure even to sneeze before Durant was upon her, slashing, x-scissoring and metal clawing with all his might. Wailing in agony, the oshawott collapsed to her knees under a hail of vicious blows. Blake's eyes widened in horror. This was a terrible start.

"Brilliant work! Now, let's try attack patter-"

An ember from struck Durant right on the head. He rounded on Templeton, making the insect equivalent of a vicious growl.

"As I was saying, attack pattern beta," Whitney continued calmly. Durant dived into the arena's floor, his claws and mandibles making light work of the ground as he tunnelled his way to Templeton.

"Templeton, can you use fire punch on the ground?" asked Bianca. Templeton shook his head.

"Oh. What about heat crash?"

"Tep."

"Overheat?"

"Tep."

"Blast burn?"

"Tep..."

"I suppose flame charge is too much to ask..." said Bianca

hopelessly.

Templeton perked up. "Tep! Tepig!" Enveloped by a fiery aura, he leapt into the air and descended on the conveniently now emerging Durant like a meteor.

"Oh, bloody distortion realm!" Whitney wailed, seeing the pained look on Durant's face. "Use cut, and fast!"

Durant slashed Templeton with his mandible. It was not much compared to his prior onslaught on Samantha, but it worked.

"Brilliant! Now try attack pattern gamma!" ordered Whitney. Durant's claw glowed steely grey, and he thwacked Templeton across the arena. The tepig, irritated at this persistent intrusion into his sleep cycle, launched a flurry of embers at Durant, but he was long gone already.

"That durant's fast," Blake whispered to Bianca.

"True," said Blake blithely, "but that doesn't really matter. Tell me, why do you think Samantha hasn't been doing much during this battle?"

"Durant hurt her too badly?" Bianca offered.

"Not as such," replied Blake. "Actually, she was a bit too busy evolving."

Bianca gasped. "Evolving?! Seriously?!"

"Yep!" Blake declared. With no small amount of pride, he turned his gaze to the mighty, tomboyish dewott waiting patiently for him to finish talking to Bianca. She was now almost a metre high, with pale blue skin, black feet and hands, a smaller nose, white whiskers, a black tail, a fin on her head, and a shell sheathed on each hip.

"Oh, wow!" Bianca exclaimed. "She's the most awesomest dewott I've ever seen! Samantha, you're the awesomest dewott I've ever seen!"

"'Most awesomest'? Is she for real?" Whitney whispered to Stacey.

"Of course she is," replied Stacey.

"Dewott! Dewott wott!" Samantha snapped.

"Good idea. Use water pulse!" Blake commanded, and Samantha did so, performing a curious elemental dance to gather enough water in her hand before hurling it at Durant. It struck him head-on, bringing with it a wave of energy powerful enough to break a medium-sized tree in half. Durant was pushed back, now clearly not in a good state, but still he stood.

"Don't worry, Blake, Durant's not invincible," said Bianca reassuringly. "It's simply a matter of--"

"I think enough time has passed now. Galvantula, use discharge!"

shouted Stacey.

"What?!" cried Blake and Bianca simultaneously.

"Get underground!" said Whitney quickly, and Durant did not need telling twice. Galvantula let forth a raging, apocalyptic maelstrom of electricity, melting some of the audience stands and blackening the ground. Samantha and Templeton were thrown into the walls, even though electricity doesn't actually have any kinetic energy, and when the smoke cleared, they had fainted. Blake, possibly out of sympathy, had fainted as well.

"We did it, Stacey! You, me, Durant and Galvantula!" declared Whitney, giving Stacey a hug.

Stacey smiled sweetly. "In case you're wondering, Galvantula spent most of the battle charging up, until his discharge attack became 427.389% more powerful than usual. That was more than sufficient to defeat- aren't the two of you listening?!"

"Blake? Blake, speak to me!" said Bianca. Then she noticed the two unconscious pok  mon. "Samantha, Templeton, say something! Oh, you poor things! No wonder he fainted as well!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Samantha, you... you understand these things happen, don't you?" asked Blake worriedly, as Samantha relaxed on the pok  mon centre bed next to him.<p>

"Dew dewott wott dew," replied Samantha matter-of-factly.

Blake smiled. She was easily the bravest pok  mon he'd ever met; that discharge had been vicious, especially so for a water-type pok  mon such as Samantha, and just a few hours later she was back on her feet. Such were the wonders of forty-fifth century medicine.

That did not change the fact that Blake felt rather guilty about her defeat. As a pok  mon trainer, he was responsible for all his pok  mon; he should know what type of pok  mon a galvantula was, and what sort of tricks someone like Stacey could pull off. On the other hand, getting overwhelmed by guilt would never do; what he needed now was practise, experience, and... other stuff.

"'Scuse me, Blake, why are you staring moodily into the distance?" Bianca asked.

Blake started. "Staring?! Who said- what- what distance?!"

"That distance," replied Bianca, gesturing to the rather stylish cityscape visible through the window.

"Oh, that one. Well, to be honest..."

"Angsting over how awful a pok  mon trainer you are and how you don't deserve Samantha?" Bianca asked, with surprising perspicacity.

"I wouldn't say that," replied Blake.

"Well, don't! You saw what Cheren got like when he lost to Lenora. Do

you want to be like him?" Bianca went on.

"Of course not!" replied Blake.

"Then think about nice things! Move on!" Bianca suggested. "That is the only reliable path to happiness."

Blake stared at her. "Since when were you so philosophical?"

Bianca grinned. "Since always! You just never listened before."

"...Okay," said Blake. "Samantha, is what she says true? Do I not actually not deserve you?"

Samantha shrugged. "Dew dewott."

Blake's face fell. "I don't deserve you?"

"Dewott dewott," Samantha replied.

Blake put his head in his hands.

"Oh, for crying out loud! It's not about whether you deserve her or not! Samantha's your friend, isn't she?" demanded Whitney, who, in spite of being right there all along, hadn't seen fit to say anything.

"Of course she... are you?" Blake asked.

"Dewott!" Samantha confirmed.

"Well... great!" declared Blake, feeling almost euphoric. "Listen, Samantha, next time we have to deal with a galvantula, I'll have a better plan. This shan't happen again."

"Wott! Wott dew dewott!" said Samantha, and she hugged Blake.

"Stacey, I don't think I can take much more of this heartwarming stuff," Whitney said quietly.

"Nor I," Stacey agreed. "It's not what usually happens."

"Oh, wow, a shooting star!" declared Bianca, her attention moving instantly to the window. "Can we go out on the roof and watch the stars? Can we?! Can we?! Can we?!"

"You don't need my permission," Blake pointed out, "but I'm not sure there's a way onto the roof. This pokémon centre's almost a hundred metres tall, so they don't want people on the roof."

Bianca's face fell. "Oh..." Then it rose again. "Hey, I know! Let's play hide and seek!"

"Now, this is more like it!" declared Whitney, as Bianca rushed off to hide, leaving Blake counting to a hundred, albeit with no idea why he was doing so.

"Never a dull moment, is there?" Stacey commented.

\* \* \*

><p>Some time has passed. Beneath a carpet of dark green leaves, interspersed with occasional glimpses of deep blue sky, a young man (well, a teenage boy) strode forth to meet his destiny. His cape was by now barely as substantial as a fishing net, but he cared not: dark, brooding, dramatic types always took walks in the forest at night, and he wasn't going to let a little clothing damage hold him back.<p>

As Cheren walked, he reflected on his recent successes. Now that he had a servine, a sawk, a herdier and a tranquill, his rematch against Lenora had gone fairly well. She had only given him the basic badge after subjecting him to a ridiculous speech on friendship and teamwork and the bond between humans and pokÃ©mon, but that was all behind him. Now, nothing could stand betwe-

"Hold it right there, you!" said an angry voice. Cheren jumped, looking around in terror to see none other than N, Melissa and Fraxure coming up to him from behind.

\_Oh, heavens above, it's N, Fraxure and the woman with the blood pressure!\_ Cheren was terrified. He knew he should probably make a witty and threatening quip before thrashing the three of them with one hand tied behind his back, but it wouldn't come, so he settled for "Um... c-can I help you?"

"We have reason to suspect," said N coldly, "that you are a pokÃ©mon trainer."

"Who? Me?" Cheren asked innocently.

"Yes, you, you shameless git!" snapped Melissa. "For starters, Fraxure mentioned a person who looks very much like you. Secondly, you've got four pokÃ©-balls attached to your belt. And if that wasn't enough, we were spying on Nacrene City gym during your battle!"

Cheren went pale. "Well, I... so what if I am?!"

Melissa unsheathed her enormous sword, with the long, savage scraping noise of an especially sharp metal object rubbing up against one of the few things it can't cut. "If you are a pokÃ©mon trainer, which, let's face it, you are, then I shall kill you. Whether or not you willingly forswear your evil ways before I chop you to pieces is up to you, but nevertheless-"

"Servine, get her!" screamed Cheren, throwing his pokÃ©-ball into Melissa's face before diving into the bushes. Melissa gave a scream of primal fury, batting the pokÃ©-ball aside even as it split open and released Servine in a flash of light. Momentarily, the forest was illuminated, just long enough for Cheren to realise Melissa had recently dyed her hair blue, cut it a bit shorter and assembled it into a ponytail. Clearly, overzealous activists had a knack for finding hair salons.

"Servine! Vine serv servi vine servine!" declared Servine.

N gave her a look. "What did you call me?! I'm your saviour, you

ungrateful little-

Servine tossed a seed bomb at his shins, which gave him pause for thought.

Melissa sighed. "I guess we'll have to kill this one as well... I'll take her from the front. Fraxure, you go round behind."

Fraxure nodded. "Xure frax."

"PLASMA!" Melissa roared, bringing her sword down in a great, sweeping arc on top of Servine. The little vine-snake pokémon raised one of her leaves, glowing bright green with grass-type energy, and parried the blow. She somersaulted over Melissa's head and attacked the newly blue-haired warrior with all her might, making lightning-fast slashes, death-defying leaps and even a triple lutz. Servine had just managed to get herself in just the right position to disarm Melissa (in more ways than one) when Fraxure thwacked her into a nearby tree.

From his shelter behind a rather dense bush, Cheren looked on in horror. Servine was getting thrashed. This was the same cute little snivy who loved mud even more than Whitney, the same brave pokémon who was ready to take on an entire legion of venipedes, the same mighty warrior who brought him to victory against Lenora, and she was going to be killed. Melissa had said so; Cheren wasn't sure N would be happy, but he was still reeling from the seed bomb, and Melissa didn't look at all lacking in initiative.

Cheren rose to his feet, raising his walking stick like a quarterstaff. "I'm over here, you hideous, overzealous, subatomic-brained iconoclast! Come and get me!"

Melissa whirled around, as did Fraxure, giving Servine a chance to catch her breath. Cheren, in spite of his fear, managed to glare defiantly at them both.

"So you do have a little honour under that awful haircut of yours!" declared Melissa, clearly amused. "Well, we'll see how long that lasts."

"You heard the woman," agreed N. "We'll see how long... uh, what's that supposed to mean, exactly?"

"Well, basically, it means we'll see how long... it lasts," said Melissa, in a small voice.

"Yes, but what? What will we see how long is lasted as to of by will to pertaining have... oh, what are you even drivelling on about, Melissa?! What am I drivelling on about?!" N demanded.

"Drivel this!" shouted Cheren, and he released Herdier, Tranquill and Sawk. The ferocious canine, agile bird and blue-skinned, white-robed humanoid materialised in a triple flash of light, and this time there was no mistaking the bright red boots Melissa had acquired, nor could there be any doubt about Fraxure's green headband. Cheren sighed. He'd never understand villains and their fashions...

Melissa gave a cry of pain and surprise as Herdier chomped gleefully down on her shin. Fraxure tried to send a dragon pulse at Tranquill,



but found himself upended by Sawk before he could even move. N readied a blast of Aura power (don't ask me how), only to be aerialaced into next week by Tranquill.

Cheren knew all he and his pok  mon had going for them was surprise, so he had to work fast. Quickly, he gathered Servine up in his arms and carried her to a safe distance.

"Servine, do you have enough energy to use one of your moves?" Cheren enquired. Servine nodded weakly.

"Good." N held her out towards the melee. "Sawk, Herdier, Tranquill, return! Servine, use leaf tornado!"

Cheren's three still-healthy pok  mon were sucked back into their pok  -balls. Servine whirled her tail through the air, stirring up a powerful tornado of leaves, and hurled it at N, Melissa and Fraxure.

"What the-?!" was the last thing Cheren heard before he rushed off into the undergrowth, shielding Servine with his body before he remembered she had a pok  -ball. He needed to get to Castelia City, and fast.

"\_That was weird...\_" commented Fraxure.

"I know," Melissa agreed, pausing in the act of picking leaves out of her top. "I hope it won't interfere with our invasion of Castelia City..."

## 11. Chapter 11: Samantha vs Leavanny

**\*\*~Chapter Eleven: Enter the Darumaka and the Leavanny~\*\***

"Cheren's log, Wednesday the twenty-ninth of April: this waiting room is mocking me. So bright and cheerful, and yet my mood is as black as night, for my beloved Servine is in dire peril." Cheren paused in his log-making, realising that the nurse was staring at him. "Nurse Joy, please don't prevaricate. Will Servine live or not?"

The Joy gave him an even funnier look. "She's already fully healed. Look, here's her pok  -ball."

Rather sheepishly, Cheren accepted the pok  -ball. "I know, it's just, I've always wanted to do a scene like that..."

"If you keep taking stupid risks like that, you'll be doing dramatic hospital scenes all day!" the nurse snapped.

"What?! How do you know what risks I've been taking?" Cheren asked suspiciously.

"I don't. It's an educated guess," replied the Joy. "If, by any chance, you are a bit of a risk taker, you might want to take it easy."

Cheren shook his head and sighed, turning his attention to the four teenagers and one durant waiting patiently behind him. Well, I say "waiting patiently"; Whitney and Stacey were busy planning how they

would defeat the gym leader of Castelia City, Blake was braiding Bianca's hair (she knew how to do it herself, but found it hard to reach behind her head), Bianca was having her hair braided, and Durant was admiring his reflection in the floor.

"Gentlemen, may I-"

"WHAT?!" cried Whitney, Bianca and Stacey, while Blake sighed and Durant gave a rather squeaky, metallic laugh.

Cheren face-palmed. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your att-"

"I'm not a lady," Whitney pointed out, "and nor is Bianca. As for Stacey..."

"I don't think I am," the orange-haired girl confirmed.

Cheren gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Tomboys, orange-haired girls, cooking enthusiasts and steel-type pok  mon, may I have your attention, please?"

No-one said anything, so Cheren pressed on. "Today, we are going to face Burgh, the gym leader of this city. His gym doubles as an art gallery, and he specialises in bug-type pok  mon. We reconvene in front of the gym at 15:00 hours. Dismissed."

\* \* \*

><p>I feel I need not go into too much detail about how our heroes responded to Cheren behaving like an army officer, nor about the treacle spillage outside the pok  mon centre in which, thank heavens, no shoes were lost. (There was a bit of a mess, though.) In fact, let's skip to the part where Blake and Bianca were heading out through Castelia City's northern exit to explore route 4.<p>

"While we're here, I'm going to try to capture a darumaka," Blake was explaining. "Burgh's bug-type pok  mon can't very well beat one of them."

"Is that always gonna be your plan, then? Catch a pok  mon with a type advantage over whatever gym you want to challenge?" Bianca asked.

"Of course not!" Blake replied. "Well... a bit, yes. But I can diversify."

"Jolly good," said Bianca. "As for me, Templeton, George, Floella and Perdita-"

"Who?" Blake interrupted.

"Perdita the purrlain," Bianca replied. "You know, the one I caught on the way to Striaton City? Oh, Blake, she's so cute and powerful and brilliant! I'd marry her in a heartbeat! If humans were allowed to marry pok  mon and me and her were old enough, that is. And if she was a boy."

Blake tried to wrap his head around that, and failed completely.

"Anyway," said Bianca, "me, Templeton, George, Perdita and Floella are going to go and do stuff. Have fun finding a darumaka!" So saying, she skipped off along the rather sandy route, humming the Hopscotch AnimÃ© theme as she went.

After taking a few moments to reflect on Bianca, Blake let Samantha, Lilly, Patrick, Lyoko and Darkblade out of their balls. It had occurred to him by now that he didn't need to shout "I choose you" every time he released a pokÃ©mon, so he didn't.

"Now," said Blake, "we've been doing plenty of training over the past day or so, so Burgh shouldn't give us too much trouble. Nevertheless, I'd quite like to capture a darumaka, so I'd like us all to find one."

"Dewott," Samantha agreed.

"Herdier! Dier dier herd!" said Lilly enthusiastically.

"Patrat rat," said Patrick.

"Audi audino!" said Darkblade cheerily.

"Loin purr purrlain..." said Lyoko sarcastically.

"That't the spirit!" said Blake, completely ignoring Lyoko. "Off we go."

The five pokÃ©mon and one human spread out across the route, searching high and low for a darumaka. It was slow going. Lilly started digging up some soft sand, but all she found within were a few sandiles, on which Bianca had already created a lengthy pokÃ©dex entry, following an even lengthier and considerably complicated cross-transceiver conversation with her father about how to avoid sandstorms. Patrick uncovered a trubbish, then passed out from his fumes and had to be awakened by some cold water from Samantha. Blake's pokÃ©dex entry on the trubbish was rather rushed. A couple of pidoves flew overhead, and Darkblade had to sit on Lyoko to keep him from trying to eat them. And if that wasn't enough, Blake stepped on a sandile's tail and got chased halfway to Nimbasa City.

Blake gave a weary sigh, brushing some of the by now rather sweaty sand off his legs. "I don't think there's a darumaka anywhere near here, Patrick."

"Rat patrat pat," Patrick agreed dejectedly.

"Let's go and find Samantha and the others."

The boy and patrat wandered off back along the route. Blake had thought to pack some cold drinks, so once they were all together they could cool down and relax a little. Then again, if this route was a taster of a desert, he didn't fancy his chances against the real thing, and there was going to be a desert at some point in the journey. Whitney would probably know what to do, though, and Bianca had packed enough sun cream for everybody. As a last resort, Samantha and Floella could use their water-type moves to cool everyone do-

"Maka! DARU!" came a loud, angry cry, and a round, orange, waist-high pokémon leapt into Blake and Patrick's path. His eyes were large and round like his body, and his hands and feet were short and stubby, with three fingers and toes respectively.

Blake's eyes widened in shock, then he looked at Patrick, and they both grinned with relief. There, at last, was a darumaka! And it was growling at them! And readying a fire punch! And Blake had really hoped to have Lilly or Samantha fight the darumaka if need be! And he was alone, but for Patrick! And he couldn't stop thinking in exclamation marks!

"Darumaka, do you want to challenge us?" Blake asked anxiously.

"Darumak! Makamaka!" declared the darumaka, his hand now ablaze with... a blaze.

"And if this patrat defeats you, you'll let me capture you?" asked Blake. It always paid to be sure.

The darumaka nodded, but something about his demeanour suggested he didn't fancy Blake and Patrick's chances.

"All right then. Patrick, you ready?"

"Rat patrat!" Patrick confirmed.

"In that case, sand attack!" Blake commanded, and Patrick tossed a handful of sand at the darumaka. The darumaka jumped aside and threw himself at Patrick, fire-punching the patrat off his feed. Patrick righted himself with admirable grace, determination aflame in his eyes.

"Use crunch!" Blake ordered. Patrick bared his fangs and leapt at the darumaka, who in response turned his skin to stone and rolled himself at Patrick. The two collided in midair, but Patrick's fangs hit home, and he threw his foe to the ground.

"Brilliant! Now hypnosis!" ordered Blake.

"Patrat!" agreed Patrick triumphantly, and he sent a wave of psychic energy to the darumaka, making him yawn even as his skin unstonified. As soon as he was asleep, Blake retrieved a spare poké-ball from his pocket and lobbed it at the darumaka. The snoozing fire pokémon was sucked inside and promptly captured, leading Blake to do a little dance of joy, while Patrick looked on in embarrassment. At least the others weren't-

"Herdier!" declared Lilly, bounding over to Patrick and giving him a congratulatory nuzzle.

"Dewott wott," agreed Samantha, admiring the newly occupied poké-ball.

"Good to see you two too!" said Blake cheerfully. "I think Patrick's about ready to evolve, actually. Let's find Lyoko and Darkblade, then go and show Bianca."

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, holy good gravy, you did it!" cried Bianca, as soon as Blake showed her his darumaka's pokÃ©-ball.<p>

"Patrick did most of it," Blake pointed out, "but I'm glad you're happy."

"What's the darumaka's name, then?" Bianca enquired.

"Um... Darren would be my choice," replied Blake.

"That's a nice name," said Bianca appreciatively. "Now, Cheren told us to be at the gym at three o'clock, and it's..." Bianca checked her pocket sundial. "Five to."

"Better hurry, then," said Blake. Bianca stared at him for a few moments, then they both burst out laughing.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ah, Blake and Bianca! I hope we did not inconvenience you too much by starting on time," said Cheren testily, as soon as he saw them arriving outside the gym. Like just about every building in Castelia City, the gym was a massive edifice of steel, glass and neon signs, complete with a slightly less high-tech sign over the door proclaiming it to be Castelia City PokÃ©mon Gym and Art Gallery.<p>

"You didn't inconvenience us at all, Cheren," Blake assured him. "In fact, it's just as well you started on time, or we'd've had to find some other way to annoy you!"

Bianca laughed. Cheren rolled his eyes. "I've already faced Burgh in battle, and won, of course. Whitney and Stacey are still inside."

"Then we'd better go too," Bianca reasoned, "or we'll miss the battles."

Blake and Bianca made their way into the gym, followed by a somewhat exasperated Cheren. It was the most elegantly furnished gym they'd been to; plush carpets, chandeliers, mahogany-panelled walls, and of course, paintings everywhere. Burgh (the gym leader, in case you've forgotten) was an artist, so had converted his gym into an art gallery. Every floor above the main arena was dedicated to art of a great many kinds, which might be a good metaphor for all the myriad species of pokÃ©mon, if you were into metaphors. Unfortunately, the building had a severe shortage of signs.

"Excuse me," said Blake, moving towards two well-dressed people admiring a still life of some sort, "can you direct us to-"

"The arena?" one of the people sniffed. "Really, Charlene, these common brats know no shame, bringing their filthy, violent ways into a palace of artistry such as this!"

Blake stared at him in astonishment. Bianca's eyes widened in horror.

"I concur wholeheartedly, Tarquin. There should be a law against

pokÃ©mon and badly-dressed humans in art galleries," the other pompous git agreed.

"How dare you talk to us like that?!" Bianca demanded. "We have just as much right to be here as you!"

"Hark! The impetuous guttersnipe speaks!" cried Tarquin.

"Oh, really, just look at those pigtails, and those veins standing out on her forehead! So unladylike!" Charlene scoffed.

"Couldn't the two of you be a little less-" Blake began.

"In my day, a girl like her would be... um... actually, every country in the world has had complete gender equality and enlightened leadership ever since the dawn of time, hasn't it?" Tarquin pointed out, slightly disappointed.

"I know. Disgraceful, isn't it?" Charlene commented. "If I had any say, however, she would be fed to a wild garchomp."

Tarquin sighed. "My dear Charlene, everybody knows garchomps only eat humans in self-defence."

"In that case, a sharpedo," Charlene continued.

"I think we'd best slip away..." Blake said quietly, taking Bianca by the hand and leading her to a safe distance.

"What do you mean, 'slip away'?! Daddy taught me always to stand up to bullies unless they were threatening my wellbeing in any way, shape or form, and there aren't any garchomps or sharpedos around, are there?!" said Bianca hotly, leading Blake back over to the rather unpleasant couple.

"Now look here, Tarquin and Charlene! You can't tell us what buildings we're allowed to visit!" Bianca declared.

"Really, it's not worth it!" Blake protested.

Bianca rounded on him. "Oh? And when will it be worth it?! When they're trying to have you executed for using the wrong kind of knife to eat?!"

Blake could not believe what he was hearing. "Since when were you so...?!"

"Since always! I just never got this angry before!" replied Bianca.

"Tarquin," said Charlene quietly, "I think perhaps we should make a hasty exit. There appears to be steam coming out of the female's ears."

"Steam?! I'll give you steam! Templeton, I choose you!" shouted Bianca, releasing Templeton in front of the two art enthusiasts. He looked around in shock, having only recently been enjoying a lovely dream about meringues.

"Bianca, for pity's sake, we don't want a fight!" Blake snapped.

"Now, I know those two toffee-nosed prats weren't very nice, but if you get Templeton to hurt them, it could burn down the gym. Plus, you'll be a criminal."

Bianca shrugged. "That's fine. Sorry to bother you, Templeton." So saying, Bianca recalled Templeton. "Blake, I have a feeling the arena's this way. Let's go!"

Before rushing off after Bianca, Blake gave Charlene and Tarquin an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry about her, you two. She's a little bit excessive."

"Th-that's fine," said Tarquin shakily.

"Really, though, you kind of deserve it..." Blake continued.

"Just go!" Charlene snapped.

Cheren, who had kept to a safe distance, hurried over to Blake and Bianca as they followed the latter's impeccable sense of direction through the art gallery. "I see you too have borne the brunt of Charlene and Tarquin," he commented. "I'll let you in on a little secret, however: they are hired by Burgh to assess potential challengers. He'll probably declare me his enemy for life now that I've told you, but I already have the insect badge, so who cares?"

"It's called the insect badge, is it?" Blake asked.

"Indeed," replied Cheren. "It's common knowledge, and it's in the guidebook. Do you know nothing?"

"You know perfectly well I don't know nothing!" said Blake. "And that wasn't a double negative! I know more than nothing! Something! That's what I know."

"I think this is it," Bianca declared, drawing to a halt outside a tall, wide, foreboding set of double doors, with "arena" written above them. The three were about to make their way through the doors when an ecstatic Whitney barrelled into Cheren, then gave him, Blake and Bianca a hug (which, despite her having relatively long arms, was a bit of a squeeze).

"We did it! Me, Stacey, Durant, Weezing, Duosion, Stacey's galvantula, Stacey's larvesta, Stacey's scyther, Stacey's leavanny, Stacey's beedrill and Stacey's pinsir thrashed the pants of Burgh! True, Beedrill and Leavanny just watched, but we did it!" Whitney declared. "I'm so proud of everyone!"

"What a child..." said Bianca exasperatedly.

"Well, I'm not very uptight to begin with, so happiness tends to explode out of me," Whitney explained to her.

"Our turn now, is it?" Blake asked Bianca.

"Just one thing: where's Stacey?" Bianca enquired.

"Stacey? She's still by the arena, waiting for me to finish being extremely happy so we can watch you and Blake challenge Burgh,"

Whitney replied.

"Then there's no reason to wait, is there? Come on!" declared Blake, making his way through the door.

\* \* \*

><p>Burgh's arena had a definite insect theme to it. The ground was made from grey cobblestone, with a large circle in the middle painted green, and six black limbs radiating outwards. The many seats for the audience, only one of which was currently occupied (by Stacey), were not much more than web-shaped hammocks, and the bright blue lamps on the ceiling bore a suspicious resemblance to a galvantula's many eyes.<p>

"Aha, more challengers!" declared Burgh, striding over to Blake and Bianca from across the arena. Blake was slightly put off his stride by how he looked. Burgh had poofy brown hair, a green long-sleeved shirt, a pair of stripy trousers, a belt with a butterfree-shaped buckle, a red scarf, and some fine shoes.

"Burgh, I presume?" said Blake, barely suppressing his amusement.

"Oh, no, there's no presumption involved!" Burgh assured him. "Which of you wants to challenge me first?"

"Ooh! Me! Me! I do! Me!" Bianca declared loudly.

"Her," Blake confirmed.

"Then let's hop to it!" said Burgh, rushing over to his place at the far end of the arena. "Whirlipede, I choose you! Use pin missile!"

"Aaargh! Stop! I haven't even chosen my pokÃ©mon!" wailed Bianca, barely evading the shower of pins Burgh's spiky, circular pokÃ©mon sent her way.

"I'll be over there if you need me," Blake informed Bianca. He ran over to the hammock-seats, placing himself beside Whitney, Stacey, Durant and Cheren. From that vantage point, they saw much of the battle unfolding: Templeton easily defeated Venipede, Floella was more than a match for Burgh's dwebble, and his leavanny eventually fell before a joint effort from Patrick, Perdita and Claribelle. Bianca was positively ecstatic.

"I'm positively ecstatic!" declared Bianca, gratefully accepting her insect badge from Burgh. "I'm also ecstatically positive. Thank you so much for the battle and the badge and everything!"

"All in a day's work," Burgh assured Bianca. "Now, boy whose hat is a blatant attempt to seem fashionable, come on over!"

Blake bit down a remark about his hat as he headed over to the arena, receiving an energetic hug from Bianca on the way. Really, that hat was more trouble than it was worth. If he had black hair and zigzags on his cheeks, people would be constantly mistaking him for Ash. In fact, it was probably time for a new hat.



Burgh smirked. "Reflecting on our choice of headgear, are we?"

Blake sighed.

"Now, bug-type pok  mon are excellent at making things difficult for their enemies, as opposed to inflicting pure damage. If you have your pok  mon simply attack straight on, you will surely lose," Burgh informed Blake.

"Isn't that exactly what Bianca did?" Blake asked.

"Er... yes, but that was a fluke!" Burgh said defensively. "Anyway, you're allowed to use up to six pok  mon to battle me, as per league rules. You may not, however, substitute pok  mon unless one of your pok  mon faints or refuses to battle. Got all that?"

"Yes," Blake confirmed.

"Good. Go, Whirlipede!" shouted Burgh. He threw Whirlipede's pok  -ball onto the floor, and Whirlipede emerged with the customary flash of light, her two large, yellow eyes quickly locking on to Blake.

Blake knew from watching Bianca's battle that Whirlipede was slow but well-protected, so his new darumaka could take advantage of his speed.

"Darumaka, I choose you!" Blake declared, releasing the small, orange pok  mon. "Use... let's see... work up!"

Darumaka have a howl of bestial rage, and his eyes quite literally caught fire.

Burgh did not look too worried. "Screech," he ordered.

"Whiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiirrrrrleeeeeepoooooooooede!" Whirlipede shrieked. Darren's eyes were snuffed out as he clutched at his ears in agony. For some reason, this also lowered his defences.

"Now use rollout!" Burgh commanded, and Whirlipede solidified her exoskeleton, then rolled at Darumaka.

"You use rollout too!" Blake ordered. Darumaka took a few moments to make sure his ears still worked, then petrified his own skin and hurled himself at Whirlipede.

Darumaka and Whirlipede collided in midair, as pok  mon tend to do, and Whirlipede was hurled back towards Burgh, almost bowling him off his feet. Darumaka landed well right in the middle of the battlefield, but as his skin unpetrified, Blake could tell something was wrong.

"Maka..." Darumaka groaned. He was badly bruised in many places.

\_The screech! He couldn't solidify himself enough!\_ Blake realised. "Darumaka, you're all right, aren't you?"

"Darumak," replied Darumaka stoically.

"Great! Let's not have any more rollouts for now, all right?" Blake suggested. "Instead, use fire fang!"

"Poison tail!" commanded Burgh.

With a cry of "Whirli! Whirlipede pede whirl whirli!", Whirlipede flew at Darumaka, uncoiling a glowing, poisonous tail from her body. Darumaka bit down on the tail with teeth of flame, swinging Whirlipede into the ground, but she was ready. Whirlipede gave her tail a flick, sending Darumaka staggering, and thwacked him into the ground.

"Oh, no... I've only just caught him, and now... wait, what are you doing?!" cried Blake. Darumaka was rising furiously to his feet, readying a fire punch.

Burgh's eyes widened. "Quick, Whirlipede, iron defence!"

"Pity steel-type pok  mon are also weak to fire, isn't it?" Blake commented, as Darumaka punched the living daylights out of Whirlipede.

Burgh sighed. "You did your best, Whirlipede, as you did against those other four." He recalled Whirlipede, then took another pok  -ball from his pocket. "Dwebble, I choose you!"

"Dweb!" said the dwebble, emerging with yet another flash of light from his pok  -ball. Dwebble was a small, orange pok  mon with two large eyes on top of his head, and a rocky shell.

"Let's not waste any time. Use fire punch!" ordered Blake, catching Burgh and Dwebble by surprise. Darumaka socked the dwebble right between the eyes, bypassing his rocky armour.

"Use rock polish, the get away!" said Burgh quickly. Dwebble began industriously polishing his shell, then dashed off to a safe distance.

"Incinerate!" Blake commanded. Dwebble's eyes widened in horror as Darumaka, despite not being much good with special attacks, sent a stream of fire his way.

"Quick, block it with rock blast!" commanded Burgh. Dwebble did not need telling twice. He unleashed a barrage of rocks at the incinerate, stopping the attack in its tracks. One of the leftover rocks almost hit Darumaka.

"Fire fang!" Blake instructed Darumaka, by now fairly certain of victory.

"Daru!" agreed Darumaka, and he rushed towards Dwebble, preparing a fire fang attack for immediate usage.

"Rock slide!" Burgh ordered.

"Wait, what?!" cried Blake, as Dwebble flung a torrent of rocks at Darumaka, completely burying him. There were a few muffled cries from underneath, then silence.

Burgh smiled. "It would seem your darumaka is not the ace in the hole you were no doubt hoping for, hat boy. What next? Come on, I'm dying to know!"

Blake silently took his hat off, then recalled Darumaka. "I'm sorry about this whole Whirlipede and Dwebble affair," he said quietly, before replacing Darumaka's poké-ball on his belt and picking another. "Go, Samantha!"

"Oh, wow, it's her! Blake only calls Samantha out when he's really serious about a battle," Bianca informed the rest of the audience, as Samantha materialised in front of Blake.

Cheren gave Bianca a funny look. "We've been pokémon trainers for less than three weeks, Bianca. How do you know what Blake does when he is determined to emerge victorious in a tournament?"

Bianca's eyes widened. "Less than three weeks?! I've had a whole year's worth of fun already!"

"Aha, a dewott! Well, my young, no-longer-hatted friend, I think you'll find Samantha's type advantage to be less of an advantage than most strategy guides would have you think. I will admit she looks fierce, but-"

"Wott! Dewott!" snapped Samantha, loosing a water pulse at Dwebble. The little hermit crab pokémon stood no chance.

"...Oh. Return, Dwebble," said Burgh quietly, recalling Dwebble. "Now, let's see how you like my no substitutions rule now! Leavanny, I choose you!"

What emerged from Burgh's final poke-ball sent Samantha into a cold sweat. She was tall and slender, with a round yellow head, two antennae, a crown of leaves, two long, pointy legs, two arms with bladed leaves for hands, and a cape made from even more leaves. There was no doubting her grass-type credentials, or indeed her ability to face Samantha.

"Vanny leav leavan leav! Leavanny!" declared Leavanny.

"Dewott dewott dew-dewott wott dew!" Samantha retorted.

"Burgh, your leavanny is actually weak to bug-type attacks, isn't she?" Blake asked.

Burgh and Leavanny shared a worried glance. "Um... yes. How do you know?"

"I heard it on the grapevine," Blake replied. "Talking of which, fury cutter!"

Samantha unsheathed her shells (which, according to one of Bianca's books, seemed to be called scalchops) and, with no small amount of fury, slashed Leavanny upside the head. Leavanny, however, did not look especially hurt.

"Use string shot, then leaf blade!" Burgh ordered, and Leavanny pulled a length of thick, sticky string from an orifice on her wrist, then hurled it at Samantha. The string wrapped itself around the

dewott, trussing her up like a doduo.

"Wott dew dewott!" protested Samantha, and she was just about to razor shell the string off when Leavanny, her leaf-hands glowing bright green, slashed Samantha right across the belly.

Blake bit his lip. Samantha was powerful for a dewott, sure, but leaf blade was a powerful attack. He knew he should say something to her, but it wasn't easy to think of anything.

Samantha took a few moments to come to terms with the pain, then realised much of the string was gone too, and loosed a water pulse right into Leavanny's face. "Wott dewott-wott! Dew!"

"Vanny?!" Leavanny cried, scarcely believing her ears.

"Razor leaf!" Burgh ordered, barely missing a beat.

"How about an aqua jet?" Blake retorted. Samantha acknowledged him with a curt "Wott!", cloaking herself in water, then leapt into the air and flew at Leavanny. Leavanny raised her hands aloft and sent a hail of sharp, whirling leaves straight at Samantha.

"Now go up and switch to water gun!" Blake ordered. Samantha looked at him like he was mentally retarded, then realised he wasn't and flew straight up, a few stray razor leaves catching her feet. In a heartbeat, she spurted out a blast of water at Leavanny. Leavanny fell flat on her back, shook herself dry and got rather shakily to her feet.

Burgh was getting rather annoyed with this Samantha person. "Use fell stinger, and make it a good one!"

"Leav-leavanny!" Leavanny acknowledged, lowering her head to aim her antennae at Samantha.

Samantha, however, was still airborne, and while Blake had had no formal education, he knew how gravity worked. "Tackle!"

Samantha descended on Leavanny like a dewott performing an aerial tackle, knocking the latter's unusually sharp antennae aside as she landed with a loud, decisive thump. When she stepped off Leavanny, the planty insect pokémon lay battered and delirious. Samantha was about to finish her off with another water gun when she noticed a twinkle in Leavanny's eye. Then a leaf storm catapulted her across the arena, where she fainted.

"Oh, no! Samantha! That leavanny! I mean, how...?! She hasn't fainted!" cried Blake. "I mean, the leavanny hasn't fainted, not Samantha."

"This is the way Leavanny works, blatant Ash-ripoff," Burgh explained smugly, as Blake recalled Samantha and thought about which pokémon to use next. "You see, I taught her to be the final solution to any and every battle. Believe it or not, up until now, we have actually been holding back, but your Samantha proved so fearsome, Leavanny had to resort to her leaf storm attack. Do not be disheartened, though, Ash-by-any-other-name; this is the first time a dewott has managed-"

"MY NAME IS BLAKE!" Blake screamed. "My mother is called Ravyn, not Delia! My surname is Stormheart, not Ketchum! I still keep in touch with my father even though he lives in Hoenn now! I don't have a hate-hate relationship with a girl called Misty, although I will admit Whitney is quite like her! If I was Ash, or any similar person, I'd've brought three small, cute pok  mon to battle you, and now everything would be riding on the last. As it stands, I still have four pok  mon still bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and spoiling for a rumble, and they're all as powerful as Samantha. Well, most of them."

"Nice speech," Bianca whispered to Whitney.

"I could've done better..." Cheren muttered.

Blake cleared his throat. "Patrick, I choose you!"

"Patrat! Rat patrat-rat!" Patrick declared, materialising with a flash of light in front of Blake.

"A patrat? Interesting..." said Burgh.

"Use hypnosis!" Blake commanded, and Patrat sent forth a wave of psychic energy, catching Leavanny square on the chest. She fell gently to the ground, her eyes growing heavy, then closing.

"Ha!" said Blake triumphantly.

"Ha!" agreed Patrick, it being an easy syllable even for one who could only say his species's name, or variations thereof.

"Now, how about a crunch?" Blake requested, and Patrick bit down savagely on Leavanny's shoulder, causing her to shift restlessly in her sleep.

"Leavanny, snap out of it!" Burgh shouted, clearly worried.

Leavanny yawned expansively, but made no move towards waking up.

"Tackle!" Blake commanded, and Patrick took a run up, pawed the ground, and charged into Leavanny.

"Now bite!" Blake went on, and Patrick bit Leavanny once more.

"Oh, enough!" snapped Burgh. "I'm pretty sure she's fainted now. Poor thing..."

\* \* \*

><p>"Did you hear that?" N whispered to Melissa, from his well-concealed position behind an x-ray camera and microphone, which were both aimed through the gym's outer wall.<p>

"Of course," Melissa replied, running a distressed hand through her now spiky pink hair. "Even after five battles, he still maintains the pretence that he cares for his pok  mon. The fathead! I have a mind to go over there and..."

"If we attack now, our plan will be ruined," N pointed out. "Trust me

on this, Melissa; if we wait until tomorrow morning, Castelia City will fall more easily than-

"Than what?" came a new voice. N and Melissa started guiltily, turning around as one to see a young girl with dark skin, two absolutely enormous black ponytails, a cream-coloured dress and comfy shoes examining them curiously.

"Er..." said N.

"Um..." said Melissa.

"Loin?" asked the purrlain who seemed to follow N around nowadays.

"RUN!" shouted N, and before Melissa could protest, he grabbed her by the collar and fled.

Iris, joint-leader of the Opelucid City pok mon gym and awesomely bodacious mistress of dragon-type pok mon, stared after them in bemusement. They really didn't make villians like they used to...

## 12. Chapter 12: The Fall of Castelia

\*\*~Chapter Twelve: Castelia Falls: Is Everything Over Before it Even Really got Started?~\*\*

"Cheren's log, Thursday the thirtieth of April: a new day dawns in Castelia City, bringing with it new adventures, new opportunities, and a whole new set of pok mon to boldly find out as much as we can about, while splitting as many infinitives as possible. We five-

"Six," Whitney reminded him, pausing in the act of putting her plus-fours on, then trying to tuck the fabric into her boots.

Cheren sighed. "Five of us six are now holders of the insect badge, granted by Burgh, the gym leader of this fair city. My plan for today is to-

"Can we go to Castelia Park before we leave?" Bianca asked. "Only I hear they have eevees, and I'd quite like to meet one."

"We'd have to go through the sewers to get there," Whitney pointed out.

Bianca's face fell. "Oh. Well... that's a rather silly way to design a city."

"There must be another way, mustn't there?" Blake piped up.

Cheren cleared his throat. "My plan for today is to venture north into route 4, then turn west into the Desert Resort, where many rare pok mon-

"Hey, I think I've got a picture of Desert Resort," Whitney declared, rummaging around in her bag for a few moments to reveal a rather thick, slightly battered book, bristling with bookmarks and stuff

stored between the pages. She opened the book and displayed it to Cheren.

Blake, Stacey and Bianca leaned over Cheren's shoulders to get a better look. Whitney had lovingly drawn a pencil sketch of what seemed to be a ruined castle, complete with crumbling sandstone walls, remnants of towers and battlements, and lots of strange pok  mon.

"If you're quite finished," said Cheren dangerously, "we're going to visit the Desert Resort and find out about all the pok  mon there. Speaking of which," he gestured to one of the better-drawn pok  mon, "what's that, exactly?"

"That's a golett," Whitney replied.

"Cool!" Bianca declared.

Blake gave her a sideways look. "You've never said "cool" before."

"So? Whitney never said "golett" before," Bianca reasoned.

"That other one's a sigilyph," Whitney went on. "They're really powerful."

"To be precise," Stacey interjected, "it has a base stat total of 490. Not overly high, but good enough, given its other characteristics. Sigilyph's best attributes are its speed and special attack, making it an excellent special sweeper, and it can still take a few hits. Sigilyph is a good match for fighting-and grass-type pok  mon, and learns many flying- and psychic-type attacks which enable it to make use of its great magical powers. Sigilyph's ability can be either wonder skin or magic guard, which both protect it from negative status effects. All in all, an excellent pok  mon for all your special attacking needs!"

"I love it when you get all technical like that..." Whitney sighed.

"A sigilyph would also be a loving companion and lifelong friend, right?" said Blake meaningfully.

"Well, that goes without saying," said Whitney.

"Actually, for all we know, sigilyphs could have a rather nasty disposition," Cheren pointed out.

"I've met one, actually," Whitney informed him, "and he was very good company. I think he might've had a crush on Weezing, too."

"She'd be the three-headed one you never saw fit to tell us about before, even though we're on a mission of exploration and discovery, right?" said Blake meaningfully.

"Well, how was I to know they're only supposed to have two heads?" Whitney protested. "Look, we've spent far too long talking, and not nearly enough time-"

"Eating?" Bianca suggested.

Whitney blinked. No-one had interrupted her like that before!

Cheren smiled. "Eating certainly seems like a good idea at present, my dear Bianca. Unfortunately, since this pokÃ©mon centre has to cater to such a large population, they don't have much in the way of replicator energy to spare. We may have to go elsewhere."

"Meaning we'll have to pay," Blake extrapolated. "Whitney, do you have any of those gold coins left?"

"Yes, but one of them might buy us a whole restaurant," Whitney pointed out.

"All right then," said Blake. "How about this: we buy one drachma's worth of assorted food and ingredients, and I make us breakfast?"

"Sounds fine," Whitney agreed.

"Then let's go!" Bianca confirmed.

\* \* \*

><p>"Excuse me," said Blake, drawing up with Whitney to the service desk in a food shop, "do you accept payment in gold?"<p>

"We do, I guess," the sales assistant confirmed.

"Great! We'd like to buy four loaves of bread, three salamis, two watmel berries, five payapa berries..." Blake rattled off a list of ingredients as long as the Hoennese elemental treaty, "...four bags of rice, two packets of marzipan, two boxes of water biscuits, your entire stock of tofu, lots of pokÃ©mon food and five bars of chocolate. Oh, and one portion of aluminium-infused nougat for Durant."

The sales assistant blinked. "Uh... are you sure you've got room for all that?"

"We have very sophisticated bags," Whitney assured her.

"Okay then. Is that lab-grown salami, replicated salami or salami from a tree?" the assistant asked, doing her very best to remain calm.

"From a tree, please," Blake replied.

"Fine. All right, then," said the assistant, and she bustled off to find what the two children and one durant were ordering. "I don't suppose you three'd care to help me get everything?"

"Of course we will," Whitney assured her. "Blake, you take the berry aisle, I'll take care of the canned goods, and Durant, you pull the trolley. Oh, and Blake..."

"Yes?" asked Blake, pausing in the act of finding the berry aisle.

"Once I've paid for all this stuff, how do you plan on paying me



back?"

"Uh..." Blake hadn't really thought of that. "I'll... um... buy you a bicycle? It might be a while before I can afford one, but..."

"That'll do nicely," Whitney assured him, and she was off.

\_Oh, great,\_ Blake sighed inwardly, absentmindedly selecting some berries. \_Now I've got a ginger-haired tomboy expecting me to get her a bike. Burgh's going to have a field day with this. At least she doesn't wear braces...\_

\* \* \*

><p>Cheren, Bianca and Stacey, meanwhile, were sitting around on one of the benches outside the shop, watching the full spectrum of human-pokÃ©mon civilisation passing right before their eyes. There was a pick-up truck passing through the city, its back laden with extra chairs bolted to the flat part. There must've been four children there, chatting merrily amongst themselves as the truck made its way past the food shop.<p>

"Do they have seat belts?" said Bianca suspiciously. In spite of her best efforts, she was her father's daughter.

"I do believe so," Cheren assured her.

Now, back to the full spectrum of civilisation. There was a family of duckletts and swannas, walking in single file. They were probably on their way to Central Plaza. And there was a conkeldurr, her concrete pillar walking sticks thudding upon the ground as she ducked into the pub, then left in a huff when she realised they didn't have gallon-sized mugs. A young man strode confidently along the pavement, resplendent in tricorne hat, fine blue tunic and tall boots, probably off to some faraway place for some sort of adventure. A middle-aged couple made their way past the P.L.A.S.M.A Industries building, and-wait a minute...

"Stacey, Bianca, have either of you seen that building before?" Cheren said quietly, making a surreptitious gesture towards the building. It was a tall, blacked-out skyscraper with a fairly drab frontispiece and, strangely enough, no flashing neon signs. What it did have was some silvery grey lettering over the door, which spelt out "P.L.A.S.M.A Industries".

"I haven't really been looking," Stacey replied.

"So... this is the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's secret base?" Bianca asked worriedly.

"I'm not sure..." replied Cheren. "I mean, it could be, but it isn't especially well concealed. Perhaps it is simply a front."

Bianca rolled her eyes. "Of course it's a front, Cheren! If we could see it from behind or from the sides, then we'd be getting somewhere."

"That isn't what a front means," Cheren pointed out tetchily.

"Well, what is a front?!" Bianca demanded. "It doesn't go on top, on the bottom, the back, the sides... it has to be in front, and that's the front of the building!"

"You're an idiot, Bianca," Cheren declared. "Now, we'd better not pay too much attention to the building, or we'll attract suspicion. In fact, look at anything else. Once Blake and Whitney get here, we'll contact Professor Juniper, then come up with some sort of plan."

"Shouldn't we contact the police?" Stacey pointed out. "Once we've established that this is a P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation building, I mean."

"True," said Cheren.

"And Burgh and the local Nurse Joy might want to know," Bianca appended.

"And the council," Stacey agreed.

"Well, yes..." Cheren acknowledged.

"And once we've done that," Bianca went on, "we should probably- oh, my days, look!"

Cheren and Stacey looked, and were not disappointed. The door to the P.L.A.S.M.A Industries building had flickered into life, and was now displaying an image of N's face. Two well-concealed loudspeakers either side of the door gave sound to the image as N launched into one of his trademark spiels:

"Good afternoon, people of Castelia City. We, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, have hacked into every image- and sound-producing device in the city, including our own door, with the intent to deliver a message of vital importance. If any pokÃ©mon trainers have seen the light and wish to renounce their vocation, please come into the building."

N paused for a moment as the door slid silently open, pushed from behind by one of the many P.L.A.S.M.A agents on hand to take care of that type of thing. Bianca, Cheren and Stacey were on their feet now, along with quite a crowd, waiting with bated breath for whatever came next. No-one, however, actually went inside.

"If any of you still oppose the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, please form a neat square directly in front of our building, so our fleet of helicopters can- I mean, so we can get to know you better." N cringed silently for a few moments. "The rest of you can get on with your day, but really, can you afford to miss this? In any case, I'll see you all shortly."

As abruptly as it had begun, the message ended.

Cheren took a quick look around. Several confused and angry people were rushing out of their houses, holding tablet computers, laptops and suchlike, which the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation has presumably gained access to. Quite a hubbub was building. A fair few people were trying to form a square in front of the P.L.A.S.M.A building, while just as many were running off to avoid whatever came next, and many more were

milling around with no idea what to do. One pawniard had even fainted in self-defence.

"I think we'd best slip away," said Cheren calmly, taking Bianca and Stacey by the hands and leading them off into an alley.

"Why?" asked Bianca curiously.

"Because we don't want to be near that square of P.L.A.S.M.A-skeptics when their helicopters get here," Stacey reasoned.

"Precisely!" said Cheren. "Now, I think right now we need to be at the edge of the city, preferably near Pinwheel Forest and Skyarrow Bridge, so if all else fails we can retreat to familiar ground."

Still led by Cheren, the three rushed out of the alley, across a road and along the north-western high street, acutely aware that quite a few people were going in the opposite direction.

"I like your thinking, Cheren," Stacey agreed, "but are we really running away from the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation? I mean, they're not much better than Team Rocket, from what I've seen. To be precise, they're only-"

"Never tell me the percentages!" snapped Cheren. "Now, we'd best keep to the alleys, at least until the heat is off."

"It isn't actually on yet," Stacey pointed out. "Personally, I recommend we take shelter in a restaurant or something, then observe events from behind a newspaper."

"And I can complete my pokÃ©dex entries," Bianca agreed.

"...What?! We can't let Professor Juniper down!" she added, noticing the looks on Stacey and Cheren's faces. "Besides, I've thought up a really good way of describing a mienfoo's mating display, and I'm bound to forget it by this time tomorrow."

Cheren sighed, which was partially because he and the girls had been running for some time now, but was a sigh nonetheless. "I know we aren't technically being pursued right this second, but it could happen any-"

With mind-numbingly inevitable timing, there was a scream, then several more. Cheren, Bianca and Stacey looked up in horror to see a fleet of sleek, implacable helicopters flying towards the P.L.A.S.M.A building, and for all they knew, to Blake, Whitney and Durant. The three pokÃ©mon trainers had scarcely a second to catch their breath when a veritable stampede of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's targets rushed past them, one of them almost trampling Bianca in the process.

"You've got to get out of here! They've got a swarm of butterfreees using sleep powder!" one of the stampederes cried, momentarily catching Stacey's eyes.

"Darmanitan! Nitan darm manitan mani darma!" another fleeing person advised Bianca.

"Oh, my head, my shoulders, my leg, my other leg, my feet, my arm, my side, my ears..." groaned Bianca, still reeling from almost being stepped on.

"Come on! Into this public house!" shouted Cheren, grabbing Bianca by the pigtails to stand her up, then leading her into a rustic-looking pub. Stacey did a few mental calculations to determine whether one of those helicopters could fit in this particular road with enough room for its passengers to disembark and, realising it could, dived into the pub after her friends.

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay, that's the massive chocolate cake taken care of. Really, we need bigger replicators..." the shop assistant complained, as Blake and Whitney worked together to squeeze the cake into Blake's bag. The assistant's name was Nadia, by the way.<p>

"That's about it, isn't it?" Blake commented.

"Yep," replied Nadia. "Now, where's my solid gold?"

"Here it is," replied Whitney, removing a drachma from her pocket. "Ancient Greek currency still counts, right?"

"I suppose," replied Nadia, accepting the coins. "I'd prefer a proper evaluation, but-"

"PLASMA!"

Blake, Whitney, Nadia and Durant started, looking around in shock for whoever shouted "PLASMA!". Finding nothing nearby, Nadia led the three out of the replicator room and over to the shop front, where three P.L.A.S.M.A agents, two human and one liepard, were busy searching the aisles.

"And just what do you think you're doing?! This is a shop, not a place where the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation make trouble!" Nadia demanded, glaring defiantly at the nearest operative.

"Pard lie-liepard, liepard lie par-pard!" the agent snapped, baring her fangs at Nadia.

"What she means is we've taken over the city," one of the human agents elaborated. "If any of you are pokÃ©mon trainers, please release your pokÃ©mon at once, or I and my companions will take you into custody.

"Custody?!" Whitney scoffed. "You say that as if you're some kind of secret police."

"Oh, but we are!" the other human agent informed Whitney. "Castelia City's so-called police are surrounded in their own headquarters, so we're the law now."

"You can't be!" Blake gasped.

"Liepard lie!" snapped Agent Liepard.

"Well, I suppose you could..." Blake conceded. "But we're not

standing for this! If you want to steal people's pok  mon-

"Steal?!" cried the male human agent, grabbing Blake by the shoulders and pulling him uncomfortably close. "If we were to \_steal\_ something, it would have to be someone else's property in the first place, and pok  mon are free!"

"Let me go!" Blake protested, shoving the agent violently off him.

"And don't take hold of him again!" Whitney added, adopting an intimidating pose.

Duranr gave a defiant squeak of agreement.

"So that's how it is, is it?" the female P.L.A.S.M.A agent said menacingly, retrieving her standard-issue bludgeon from inside her sleeve (where it was easy to get a hold of, in spite of a certain amount of tearing).

"It would seem so," the male agent agreed, retrieving his own bludgeon.

"Do you think the four of us can take them?" said Whitney quietly.

"What do you mean, the four of us?! I'm off!" Nadia declared, and she ran off to the shop's rear exit.

Blake took a quick look at the P.L.A.S.M.A agents, who, for some reason, weren't attacking yet. They all looked both strong and experienced, although the woman had left her right leg relatively unguarded, allowing for a quick, downward thrust to cripple her. If Blake had had even the slightest talent with a sword, that could've been useful, but no matter: Durant could take care of her. The liepard was crouching down to pounce at the first opportunity, so if Blake released one of his pok  mon at the right angle, it could land on her back and pummel her. As for the man, his guard was low, allowing for a quick karate kick to the neck. Blake knew in theory how to do that, but it never seemed to work, so it was probably best for Whitney to take care of the bloke.

"The three of us can probably take them," Blake confirmed.

"No you can't!" the male human agent retorted.

"They could, at a pinch..." the female human agent pointed out.

"Well, maybe," the man conceded. "Nevertheless, we're highly trained P.L.A.S.M.A foundation operatives, and they're just two children and a rather stupid-looking durant."

"That does it!" Whitney snapped. "Durant, get that liepard! I'll take the one with the tears in her sleeve!"

"Wait, that wasn't my plan!" Blake protested, then he realised that in all the confusion he hadn't really told Whitney his plan, so he resigned himself to watching Durant clobber Agent Liepard while

Whitney knocked the woman for six.

"Just you and me now, boy," the other agent declared, advancing on Blake. "If you stop being a pok  mon trainer, I might not have to hurt you too badly."

"Yeah, no, not going to happen. Get him, Lilly!" Blake ordered, throwing Lilly's pok  ball right at the man's face. With a flash of light, Lilly materialised in midair, then bit down on the now dazzled agent's head. The P.L.A.S.M.A agent brought his bludgeon down on Lilly, but she leapt out of the way, leaving the poor chap's head completely exposed.

Blake could not help but laugh out loud as the P.L.A.S.M.A agent's baton connected with his own head, then quickly turned sober as the agent, by now in a towering rage, threw himself at Lilly.

"Use roar!" Blake ordered, thinking fast. Lilly let out a furious, deafening roar, causing the P.L.A.S.M.A agent to fall flat on his face and the previously fearless liepard to cower in Durant's grip, giving him time to knock her out with a bug bite attack. Blake pounced on the male agent's back, pinning him down, and looked on in satisfaction as Whitney and Durant gently but firmly evicted the other two from the shop.

"That was a nice fight," Whitney commented, wandering over to Blake, Lilly and the other P.L.A.S.M.A agent. "D'you really think they've taken over the city?"

"Of course we have!" snapped the male agent, although he was slightly muffled, thanks to Blake. "You may have won an unexpected victory against us due to sheer luck, but there are more than five hundred P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation operatives in the city, and we have helicopters equipped with laser guns, not to mention the butterfree swarm. Reinforcements should be arriving right about--"

"RUN!" shouted Whitney, dragging Blake off the P.L.A.S.M.A agents and leading him to the back of the shop. "Whenever someone says something should happen right about now, that's when it happens, and I don't want to be around to see those reinforcements!"

Blake had been thrown a bit of his stride, but he knew what Whitney was saying made sense, so he did not protest. The three companions soon found the shop's back door, hid their pok  balls and set off into the night. Well, technically they set off into the late morning, but still...

\* \* \*

><p>"Gentlemen," said Cheren meaningfully, "we now face a crisis greater than-"<p>

"For the last time, stop using that word!" snapped Stacey.

Cheren, Stacey and Bianca were lying low, enjoying some glasses of chocolate milk at a quiet corner table while outside, not much happened. The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, having taken over the city, didn't really have much to do, and just about everybody was indoors. Even at midday, with the bedazzling array of signs at their brightest, the Castelia City seemed quiet and dull.

"Look, I enjoy saying 'gentlemen'!" Cheren snapped. "It rolls off the tongue, you know? Anyway, we now face a crisis greater than any crisis ever faced before. We three could well be the last remnant of pokémon training to be found in the entirety of Unova, and the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will be constantly houndouring us down."

"I think that's going a bit far," said Stacey. "I mean, they've only taken over this city, and I estimate a 93.6248% chance that Whitney, Durant and Blake will have kept out of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's grasp. As for other trainers, it is highly unlikely that the gym has fallen, nor the pokémon centre. The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will probably have targeted the police station, but their chances of capturing it are probably about 37.2249%."

"How do you work these percents out?" Bianca asked curiously.

"Not telling!" replied Stacey.

"As I was saying," Cheren went on, "the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will no doubt be on the hunt for pokémon trainers in this city. As such, we need to work from within to bring them down."

"Shouldn't we maybe consider-" Stacey began.

"Running away? Calling Professor Juniper? Surrendering?!" Cheren snapped. There was a newfound gleam in his eye, which sent a chill down Bianca's oesophagus, her spine having already fulfilled its chill responsibilities. "Oh, no. No way. This is what I was born to do! Stalking fearlessly through the shadows, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, dropping silently down to strike swiftly and inexorably at my foe, standing tall against the overwhelming might of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation with no-one but my beloved Servine, Sawk, Herdier and Tranquill by my side, as well as my friends Bianca, Blake, Stacey, Durant and Whitney and all the other pokémon..." Cheren pulled his hat down over his forehead, then turned to gaze dramatically out through the window. "You hear me, N, Melissa, Ghetsis, et al?! I'M READY FOR YOU!"

Bianca and Stacey looked at each other incredulously.

"He's really lost it this time..." sighed Bianca.

"Meaning Cheren has gone nuts like this before?" asked Stacey.

"Not nuts, exactly. He gets a little overexcited, though," Bianca replied. "Speaking of which, I brought a bag of peanuts. Who wants some?"

Cheren gave Bianca a heavy look. Stacey shook her head.

"No-one?" said Bianca, in a small voice.

"I'll have some," said a new voice, and Bianca looked up in joyful surprise to see a dark-skinned girl with insanely large twin ponytails making her way over to their table.

"Who in the name of all things holy are you, and what do you want with your peanuts?!" Cheren demanded furiously.

Bianca interrupted him just in time. "You'll have peanuts? Well... that's not good. I only said I had peanuts to stimulate a conversation."

Iris (for it was she) shrugged. "That's fine. So tell me, are the three of you pok  mon trainers?"

"Um... maybe?" said Bianca nervously.

"Don't worry, Bianca, that's Iris, the gym leader from Opelucid City. She's no enemy," Stacey pointed out, shuffling her chair along to make room for Iris.

"Oh, really?" said Cheren suspiciously. "For all we know, she could be a ditto or a zoroark!"

"Do you really think that's likely?" Iris asked, giving Cheren a sideways look. Cheren ignored her, focusing his attention on his chocolate milk.

"Anyway, time to introduce ourselves! I'm Bianca, from Nuvema Town, and I want to be the world's most open-minded and supportive mother. I also am a pok  mon trainer, but don't tell anyone," Bianca declared.

"And I am Stacey, a battle strategist and bug-type pok  mon expert," Stacey informed Iris.

"Cheren's the name, son of Gerald and Christobel, firstborn of the House of McTavish, Guardian of Nuvema Town, etcetera," said Cheren, still trying to be passive-aggressive.

"Lovely to meet you, Bianca, Stacey and Cheren! As one of you said, I am Iris of Opelucid City, the second-most awesome and bodacious dragon trainer in the world! The best is my grandpa, Drayden. Lance and Claire are joint third," Iris declared, absentmindedly snapping her fingers to get some attention from a waiter. "Now, when do we go and fight the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation?"

All of a sudden, Cheren perked up. He was beginning to get the feeling this girl might be an asset...

### 13. Chapter 13: The Rise of Castelia

**\*\*~Chapter Thirteen: Castelia Rises Again: It's Not Over, and it Has by Now Really Got Started~\*\***

It was a bright, sunny day in Castelia City. Unfortunately, most of its inhabitants were too terrified of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation to go out and enjoy it. Even though they'd just finished building a new, non-sewery road to Castelia Park, it was all but deserted: humans were afraid to be seen near pok  mon for fear that the regular patrols would draw the wrong conclusion, and pok  mon were staying away from humans to avoid getting them into trouble.

"Just look at this," Cheren commented ruefully, from his vantage point over at the side of the park, where he could see everyone enjoying a subdued, separated morning. "This park was once a thriving place where humans and pok  mon lived in harmony and all that stuff,



and now it's like there's been an inter-species war or something!"

"Servine vine, serv!" Servine agreed.

"Too right," agreed Stacey. "At least the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation bought our story about being innocent researchers who need lots of pok  mon with us for protection, and only gave us five lashes each when we willingly handed over our pok  -balls."

"But where are we gonna get new pok  -balls?" Bianca asked worriedly, gently rolling the snoozing Templeton off her foot. "I mean, not that I have anything against Perdita, Claribelle, George, Templeton, Floella, Servine, Herdier, Sawk, Tranquill, Galvantula, Scyther, Pinsir, Leavanny, Larvesta, Beedrill, Flygon and Skorupi, but we're kind of crowded out. Plus, most of Stacey's pok  mon are from another region, so that'll get people interested. And that's a bad thing now!"

"True enough," Cheren conceded. He looked around for a few moments, deciding it was safe to continue speaking. "We need not worry, however. For now, we must secretly gather up all pok  mon, pok  mon trainers and warriors in this city in preparation for a military campaign. Once Blake, Whitney and Iris have finished breaking Burgh and his companions out of the gym, we shall take down the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation once and for all."

"That's all very well, but we've been over this plan before. Why are we saying all this stuff now? I mean, it's as if we're trying to make things clear to some sort of invisible audience!" said Stacey, laughing at the very notion of such a ridiculous state of affairs.

Bianca looked momentarily shiftily.

"We are all on edge now, Stacey. It helps to have something to be sure of," Cheren informed his precise friend.

"Scythe?" Scyther asked curiously.

Cheren frowned. "That's a very good question, I'm sure, but I can't really understand Scytherese."

"I can. He's asking how exactly we plan to defeat the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. I mean, they have helicopters, laser guns, a swarm of butterfrees..."

"That seems a bit odd to me, actually," Cheren interjected. "The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation believe in pok  mon equality, but how could they have enough money to give each butterfree a fair wage?"

"Maybe they're paid in food," Bianca proposed.

"Sawk, awk sawk saw?" Sawk proposed.

"Volunteered?! I very much doubt any self-respecting butterfree would willingly participate in the conquering of a city," Cheren pointed out. "As for the food..."

Sawk scratched her head. "Sawk sawk...? Saw-sawk sawk sawk sawk"

sawk."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it, but where would the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation get that many skateboards, false moustaches and packets of temporary adhesive?"

Bianca looked at Stacey, who simply shrugged.

"Anyway..." said Cheren.

"Time for lunch?" said Bianca hopefully.

"Well, yes, maybe," Cheren conceded. "I was thinking more along the lines of a change of clothes."

"Frillish frill! Lish lish frillish!" declared Floella, gesturing with a soft, pink tentacle to a rather nice seafood restaurant over by the park. They served her favourite food there: seaweed and soft coral in brine, garnished with roasted carvanha. She would've preferred a live, non-replicated carvanha so she could absorb its soul, but most humans and a fair few other pokÃ©mon were sensitive about that sort of thing. Really, they were pathetic nowadays. Nature was meant to be red in tooth and claw, and it came at you blazing with elemental powers, tore your leg off, then ate it in a bread roll with cheese, mushrooms and plenty of hoummous.

"I wonder what Floella is thinking?" Stacey whispered to Bianca.

"Probably about how yummy lunch is going to be," replied Bianca, noting the cheerful, rosy-cheeked expression on Floella's face. "I, for one, would love some seafood."

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, outside Burgh's gymart gallery, a covert operation was just beginning. Next to the electric bicycle racks opposite the gym, three teenagers, a weezing with three heads instead of the usual two, and a fine, upstanding durant were getting ready.

"Those guards look rather dangerous, but we can still pull it off," Whitney said confidently, noting the long, large-tipped tridents the four human guards held. Two of the humans were women, just so you know. Above them, two musharnas hovered in place, and six pawniards flanked the doors. (One musharna and three of the pawniards were male, of course, and the others weren't.)

"There are twelve of them, right? Meaning we're outnumbered three to one," Blake commented.

"Good point, well made," said Whitney. "Three to one isn't especially bad, though, what with all our pokÃ©mon. However, I am confident our plan will work."

"If you say so," said Blake.

"Now," said Whitney, "Blake, take my hand. Iris, take my other hand. Durant, take Blake's hand. Blake, try to bend down a bit so Durant can reach your hand. Weezing, you know what you're doing."

"Weez," Weezing acknowledged.

Iris, Blake, Durant and Weezing took their places as instructed. They'd had some time to practice this plan, and were fairly confident.

Whitney cleared her throat. "Hey, guards! Your mothers would like to wear army boots, but your fathers are sexist gits who force them to wear high heels and dresses! Unless, of course, you're from a species which doesn't wear clothes, in which case your mothers are bidoofs and your fathers are magikarps!"

The guards stared at her.

"Um... what?" one guard asked.

"Musharna sharn, sharna," another proposed.

"Pawn pawniard!" snapped a third guard.

"Some of my best friends are bidoofs and magikarps," another guard pointed out.

"And both my parents are women!" the first guard declared. "Only one of them wears boots regularly, though."

"Fair enough," said Whitney breezily. "Use smokescreen!"

With a sound like a jet engine in reverse, Weezing took in a huge breath.

"You might want to hold your noses," Whitney informed her companions.

"We're holding hands, you know," said Iris, as Weezing breathed out a thick, billowing cloud of smoke, cloaking the whole street in darkness.

"True. Nevertheless, here we go!" declared Whitney, and she dragged Blake, Iris and Durant through the smoke, around confused and furious guards, and straight to the doors. Durant smashed them open, and the group dashed through in a heartbeat, dodging wildly-thrown psybeams, shadow balls and tridents. When the smoke cleared, the only signs that the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's security had failed were twelve angry, confused, gender-neutral guards, a set of double doors hanging ajar, and several butterfrees arriving too late.

Once inside the gym, the five took a few moments to catch their breath. Iris, Whitney and Durant were exhilarated; Weezing and Blake were just glad to be alive and not passing out from smoke inhalation.

"That went well," Iris commented after the afore-mentioned few moments.

"I suppose so," said Blake. "Now, we'd better find Burgh, Charlene and Tarquin."

"And all the resident artists and pokÃ©mon trainers," Iris pointed out.

"Weezing!" said Weezing confidently.

"That's the spirit!" agreed Whitney. "Now, where could he be?"

"We could ask that zebstrika," Blake proposed, gesturing to a zebstrika standing by a few contemporary Micronesian polystyrene carvings.

"We certainly could," Whitney agreed, heading over to the zebstrika. "Excuse me, do you know where Burgh is?"

"He and everyone else whom the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation are keeping prisoner in the gym are currently in the basement, watched over by a violent woman called Melissa, and three fierce pok  mon known as Heidi, Trillie and Samuel. They are, respectively, a hydreigon, a tropius and a samurott," replied the zebstrika. "If you wish to rescue them, I would advise caution when engaging the guards."

Whitney, Blake, Iris, Weezing and Durant stared at her wide-eyed, open-mouthed and embodying every other piece of surprised body language under the sun.

"What? Haven't you ever seen a zebstrika giving people directions before?" the zebstrika asked.

"You... you can talk!" declared Iris.

"So what? All pok  mon can understand the language of their homeland, in this case Japanese. While most can only pronounce their names, and variations thereof, I am capable of speaking in a more complicated manner," said the zebstrika.

"Really?!" cried Blake. "We'd best remember that."

"You learn something new every day," Whitney commented.

"Indeed," agreed Durant, although no-one really heard him.

"Tell me, is your name Zephyr, by any chance?" Blake asked.

"That's right. How'd you guess?"

"Bianca mentioned you," Blake replied.

"Bianca?" said Zephyr, furrowing her brow in confusion. "That would be an adolescent girl with twin plaits, correct? Extremely cheerful and childlike?"

"That's the one," Blake confirmed.

"Aha! So, you'd be Drake and Britney."

"What? No, we're Blake and Whitney," said Blake.

"And Durant, Weezing and Iris," Whitney added.

"Oh, I see. Blaine and Winona," said Zephyr.

"Whitney and Blake!" snapped Whitney.

"And me and those other two!" declared Iris.

"Um... who and what?" asked Zephyr, her cheeks adopting a pinkish hue of embarrassment.

Whitney sighed. "Look, my first name is Whitney, as in Britney with tungsten instead of bromine. That's because the chemical symbol for bromine is Br and the symbol for tungsten is W, understand? My surname is Blazeheart, which is literally "blaze" and "heart" stitched together. My middle name is Stephanie, with a Ph, as in the scale used to measure acidity or alkalinity. Did I mention I'm great at chemistry? In any case, my full name is Whitney Stephanie Blazeheart, so I am commonly known as Whitney. My brother calls me Ginger, though."

"Oh, I see. And the boy?"

"My full name's Blake Ethan Stormheart. Blake is "lake" with an extra B at the start, Ethan is "than" with an extra E at the start, and Stormheart is... "tormheart" with an extra S at the start. And Whitney, since when did you have a brother?"

"Since my parents decided to make one," Whitney replied. "His name's Simon."

"Jolly good!" Zephyr declared loudly, lest discussion should turn inexorably to Simon. "So, Blake and Whit-"

"Excuse me," said Iris, "my name's Iris Joanna Rosenfeld. That's Iris as in the flower, Joanna as in my parents not knowing whether my middle name should be Anna or Jo, and Rosenfeld as in me having Jewish ancestors."

"Whatever. Now, Whitney and Blake, which of you is the Hero of Truth?" Zephyr asked.

"Um... hero of truth? I don't have the slightest clue what you're going on about," said Blake.

"Well, that's pretty truthful, I suppose. How idealistic are you?" asked Zephyr.

"No idea," replied Blake.

"Extremely!" Whitney declared.

"I see. Well... perhaps we can leave things as they are for now, vis a vis your destinies. Come along. I'll show you to Burgh and his companions," said Zephyr, and she set off at a brisk trot, followed by a confused Blake and Whitney, a mildly jealous Iris, a typically stoical Durant, and a Weezing who hasn't yet had enough character development for me to tell how she would be feeling.

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, in a different part of the city, Cheren was striding along with a spring in his step, resplendent in his new over-the-top boots, distressed jeans, leather jacket and band t-shirt. His floppy

brown hat was perched jauntily on his head, facing backwards, and he felt every bit the rebel leader.<p>

"All in all, I'd say today has been an absolute success!" declared Cheren. "Hundreds of new recruits throughout the city, the entire police force no longer held prisoner in their own headquarters, and everyone ready and willing to die for our cause... it doesn't get much better than this."

Stacey and Bianca did not share that sentiment, and nor did all their pok  mon, who now walked un-pok  -balled beside them. (If the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation asked any awkward questions, they could just claim to be part of a very large group which happened to include lots of pok  mon.) Cheren had always been a little bit melodramatic, but he was taking this whole P.L.A.S.M.A invasion thing either way too seriously, or not seriously enough.

"The pok  mon centre's a few blocks away, so we don't need to hurry," Stacey commented. "According to my calculations, we'll also have time for some tea and cake before we meet up with the rest of the warriors."

"That sounds wonderful!" commented Bianca. "Then again, what with all the treacle residue, we shouldn't cut it too fine."

Since it was a medical facility, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation had allowed the pok  mon centre to operate as usual, but with new management and a strict no-trainers-admitted policy. This idea's obvious fallacies, pok  mon being denied medical care simply for having a human trainer, seemed to have gone right over their heads. As to the treacle spillage, Bianca need not have worried; the people of Castelia City had recently installed wipe-clean streets, and cleaning it up was a cinch.

"Cinch indeed..." Stacey muttered, heaving her foot out of the congealed, extra-sticky treacle lining the gutter. (The wipe-clean gutters were supposed to arrive next week.) "Now, as per my calculations, we--"

"Yes, yes, we've got about five minutes for tea and cake, we know! Do you realise how annoying your percentage stuff is?!" Cheren snapped.

"I never gave it much thought, actually," Stacey replied, ignoring the hostility behind Cheren's words. "And we actually have four minutes and eighteen seconds."

Cheren gave her a dirty look.

"Come along!" declared Bianca, giving Templeton a gentle nudge to stop him from falling asleep. She led the party into the pok  mon centre, ignoring the shards of glass and pieces of twisted, blackened metal all over the floor, and rushed over to the least elementally ravaged part of the reception desk. Rather than Nurse Joy and an audino, the desk was occupied by a gothitelle, wearing a gothitelle-sized P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation raincoat.

"Can me and this group of free-willed individuals some of which happen to be pok  mon and humans have some tea and cake, please?" asked Bianca.

"Gothitelle," the cone-shaped humanoid pok  mon replied, heading over to the replicator, which had somehow survived the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's attack. She pressed a few buttons, causing twenty cups of tea and slices of Victoria sponge cake to materialise, then levitated the sustenance onto the desk.

"Yay! Time to eat!" Bianca declared, and she consumed her piece of cake in a single enormous scoff. "Thank you, gothitelle, assuming that's your name!"

"\_Actually, it's Polly,\_" said the gothitelle telepathically.

Stacey's large party of bug-type pok  mon found the cakes lacking in nectar, but other than that, the food was excellent. Templeton, regrettably, fell asleep in his tea, and Sawk, in a rare moment of not being serious, did a spot of juggling with the empty plates. As the group ate, drank and enjoyed themselves, Cheren stalked quietly over to a rather secluded corner and retrieved his cross-transciever from his pocket. Surely it would be only a few moments before-

"Cheren, is that you?" came the unmistakable voice of Blake from the cross-transciever. "We've found Burgh and his mates, and-"

"For crying out loud, don't call me Cheren!" Cheren snapped, in a fierce whisper. "For the last time, I'm Agent Twilight, you're Agent Raptor, Whitney is Agent Arcanine, Bianca is Agent Rainbow and Stacey is Agent Carapace."

Blake rolled his eyes, although, having deactivated the video chat feature, there was no way Cheren would know. "We have found Burgh, Charlene, Tarquin and a few others, being held by the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. The guards look quite powerful, but we can take them. We've also met up with Zephyr."

"Zephyr? The zebstrika Agent Rainbow met a short while ago?" said Cheren.

"That's right. She seems to think I'm-"

Cheren's eyes widened in horror. "Agent Raptor? Agent Raptor, respond! Talk to me, damn it!" Why would the transmission choose this moment to cut out, of all moments?!

\* \* \*

><p>"No battery left," Blake declared glumly, replacing the cross-transciever in his pocket.<p>

"Never mind. We can beat this Melissa person without live-tweeting the whole thing, right?" Iris declared.

"I suppose," said Blake.

"All right. Do you think we should just attack from the front, or skulk around a bit more and find some hidden weakness?" asked Zephyr.

"The front, of course!" said Whitney.

"That's what I'd do," Iris agreed.

"Weezing, weez zingzing. Weezing!" declared Weezing. Durant chirped confidently.

"They both say "frontal assault", " Zephyr confirmed.

"In that case, so do I," agreed Blake.

Although Melissa had now dyed her hair bright green and assembled it into a long braid, she was still clearly the same Melissa, and carried the same oversized sword. With her were Heidi, Trillie and Samuel, all of whom looked rather intimidating in person, but their attackers had one unforeseen advantage: lots more pok  mon still hidden in their pok  balls.

"Duosion, I choose you!" declared Whitney loudly, releasing Duosion. The four P.L.A.S.M.A agents started, looking over in horror, which quickly turned to rage when they realised they were so much fiercer than those meddling brats.

"Dreigon drei! Hydrei!" Heidi roared, charging up a hyper beam in all three of her mouths.

"What she said!" agreed Melissa, bringing her sword to bear.

"HydreiGON!" shouted Heidi, and her three hyper beams screamed down the corridor, passing straight over the heads of all her enemies to punch through the wall at the other end.

"Idiot..." muttered Whitney.

At the sight of Heidi staring dumbfounded at the holes at the far end of the corridor, Blake felt a sudden surge of confidence. "I choose everyone!" he declared, and set about activating all his pok  balls, releasing Samantha, Lyoko, Lilly, Patrick, Darkblade and Darren, the latter of which had gladly accepted the name Darren after the battle with Burgh.

"As do I. Go for it!" shouted Iris, and she released her druddigon, haxorus, armaldo and salamence, whose names were Druddigon, Haxorus, Armaldo and Betty.

"You really think you're something, don't you?" Melissa commented dryly. "Well, for all I know, not all of you are brainwashed slaves, but the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will never fall! In the name of N, we cannot fail, my sisters!"

"Samurott?" said Samuel meaningfully.

"And brothers! Siblings! We cannot fail, my siblings! Well, technically we could, but... since when could evil triumph?"

"Tropius pius trop tropi..." sighed Trillie.

"Hydrei!" snapped Heidi, gesturing to the now much larger group of



meddling brats, who were waiting patiently for the fight to start.

Melissa shook her head to clear it. "All right... let's not bother with plans or anything. For the honour of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation!"

So saying, Trillie, Samuel and Melissa rushed at the meddling brats. Heidi leapt over their heads, extending six long, black, scarf-like appendages from her necks, and sent forth a wave of draconic energy, letting out a furious roar.

"Quick, Duosion, use protect!" Whitney ordered, and Duosion did so with some haste, forming an unbreakable barrier which caught the full brunt of Heidi's attack.

"Get that hydreigon, everyone!" Blake commanded, reasoning that she was likely to be the most powerful enemy.

"Dewott!" agreed Samantha, loosing a water pulse at Heidi. She barely felt it.

She did, however, feel the flurry of attacks from Blake's other pokémon: hyper voice, confuse ray, shadow claw, incinerate and doubleslap, closely followed by a dragon pulse, flamethrower, hydro pump and air cutter from Iris's pokémon.

Heidi howled in pain, falling back down the corridor and breaking through much of the ceiling in the process.

"Great, she's out of our way. Come on!" shouted Melissa, and she lunged at Betty, almost removing the poor salamence's right wing.

"Hey! Pick on someone your own size!" Iris declared, stomping fiercely on Melissa's foot.

"Druidragon! Go druid-dragon!" Druidragon roared, rallying the others.

"\_The dragon speaks the truth. Come, master Stormheart, let us finish this!\_" declared Samantha, gesturing to Blake with her scalchop.

Blake stared at her. "What? Us? But, um... I've never... how are you even talking?!"

Samantha rolled her eyes. "\_I'll give you three guesses, and the first two don't count.\_"

"Just go with it, Blake," Zephyr advised him. "Whitney and Iris are in the thick of it already, and you won't let a girl outdo you, will you?"

Blake's eyes narrowed. "Since when was there any dishonour in being outdone by someone who happens to be female?"

"Um... trick question," said Zephyr.

Blake sighed. "Okay, fine. What do I do, Samantha?"

"\_Again, three guesses,\_" replied Samantha.

\_Well, that isn't much help...\_ Blake reflected. With a sigh, he shut his eyes and tried to tap into his qi, or whatever. He was just about to give up, reasoning that he'd already spent much too long not fighting, when he felt Samantha's hand wrapping itself around its own, and suddenly he understood. Alone, Samantha was just a ferocious, shell-wielding water spirit with limited strategic capabilities, and Blake was just an extra-sapient primate with delusions of grandeur, about as much use in a fight as a cardboard helicopter. Together, though, they shared a power beyond their wildest dreams.

"Come on, Samantha! Water pulse!" Blake shouted, as much for his own benefit as Samantha's, and as one, they leapt towards the enemy, readying water pulses. Samantha threw hers a bit to the left and Blake threw his a bit to the right, both feeling more alive than ever before, certain of their own imminent success.

The water pulses struck the wall, splashing down onto the unconscious forms of Melissa, Heidi, Trillie and Samuel.

Blake looked around nervously, feeling the disapproving gazes of everyone still conscious boring into his head. He shrugged sheepishly.

Samantha placed a consoling hand on Blake's side. "\_Better late than never, right?\_"

\* \* \*

><p>Outside Castelia City's unprecedentedly large pokÃ©mon centre, the atmosphere was one of quiet determination. More than a thousand humans and pokÃ©mon of all shapes, sizes and colours waited quietly all over the wide road outside the pokÃ©mon centre, spilling out onto the docks, down to the beach and into the alleyways. There was no way the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation could fail to notice them now, but so what? Either way, one of the great powers of Castelia City would fall before the day was done. And if "fall" meant "be convinced via diplomacy to pack up and head back to their former island headquarters and not cause any more trouble", so much the better. Let's face it, though: that wouldn't happen in a million years.<p>

"Do you think the others will be here soon?" Stacey asked Cheren quietly, pulling her newly-acquired black trenchcoat around her against the cold afternoon breeze.

"We can but hope," Cheren replied darkly, giving Stacey's coat a jealous glance before turning to gaze dramatically into the distance.

"We can do more than that, can't we? I mean, there's no way Stacey will leave Whitney behind, we'd never betray Blake, and as for Iris..." Bianca commented.

Cheren gazed broodingly into her shining viridian orbs. "Even now, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's iron grip stretches across the city, Bianca. We cannot afford sentiment." He broke eye contact with the

other, turning his brooding gaze to the ground. "Blake knew that when he signed up for this mission. When I signed him up..."

Bianca rolled her viridian orbs. "Stacey, old shoe, d'you think our friends are coming soon?"

"Of course they are!" Stacey replied confidently.

"That's great! It's about time someone recognised what kind of story we're in," Bianca declared. "I mean, this Young Adult Dystopia stuff is all well and good, but we're pokémon trainers. I've got pigtails, for crying out loud!"

"Bianca... are you implying that we're characters in some fictional document serialised over the internet, written by a 15-year-old boy from Scotland, who might be 16 by the time this chapter gets published because it's taking so long? Only that's pretty far out, even for you," Stacey pointed out. "To be precise, 185.3649% further out than your usual standard."

Bianca giggled cheekily.

"I sent them to their dooms..." Cheren muttered.

"Vine servine?" Servine asked, laying a comforting vine on Cheren's shoulder.

"It's just...!" Cheren broke off, partially for reasons of drama and partially because he couldn't think of what to say next.

"Servi-vine, serv," Servine said understandingly.

"Hey, I think that's them!" Bianca declared, tugging on Cheren's sleeve and gesturing to two teenage girls, one teenage boy, shedloads of pokémon, a gym leader, two pompous oafs, several artists, a few pokémon trainers and one particularly noteworthy zebstrika, making their way over to the group.

"I knew they'd pull through!" Cheren declared.

"Burgh! Tarquin! Charlene! Zephyr! Blake! Whitney! Weezing! Durant! Iris! Lots of other people!" cried Bianca.

"That's us!" said Blake.

"Indeed," agreed Zephyr.

"Dashed good to see you, Burgh, old boy!" said Cheren loudly, giving Burgh an energetic handshake, which he was hardly expecting. "And you lot," he added superciliously.

"Cheren, you'll never guess what happened to Blake and Samantha!" Whitney informed Cheren, while Burgh, Zephyr and Iris set about making plans.

"They developed aura powers," said Cheren matter-of-factly.

Whitney stared at him. "How did you...?!"

"It was kind of inevitable, what with his name," Cheren pointed out. "So, Blake Stormheart, son of Ravyn, you jammy git: what kind of Aura powers do you have?"

Blake was a bit ticked-off about the "jammy git" remark, but decided not to follow it up. "Well, when Samantha's with me, I can make water pulses. I could probably dual-wield scalchops, too, if I could find any the right size."

"That's wicked! When does Whitney get her superpowers, then?" Stacey demanded, too excited to bother coming up with a statistic.

"Me and Durant are working on it," Whitney assured her.

\* \* \*

><p>And thus, the stage was set. Warriors from both sides were ready for battle, brave and bold. They knew they were going to make it: they would find a way. Hopefully.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"Onwards, for the glory of Nuvema Town and the Clan McTavish! Chaaaaaaarge!" declared Cheren, and brandishing his walking stick like a quarterstaff, he rushed at the P.L.A.S.M.A Industries building.<p>

All around, the good people of Castelia City were charging towards the building, hollering, shouting the names of their species, breathing fire, shooting thunder at the sky, egging each other on, and occasionally trying to aim sniper rifles at the windows. Such fiery blood, team spirit and plain craziness had never before been seen in Castelia City, and it was intoxicating; but as Blake saw the first gleam of sunlight on an oncoming butterfree's massive compound eyes, he couldn't help but wonder whether this was what he wanted to be doing.

The few guards the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation had managed to station in front of their building fell quickly, and surprisingly, Cheren and his beloved Servine played a major role. (Whitney, Stacey and Blake were too far back to see, but Bianca later swore blind she saw Cheren take a stun bolt to the face and not even flinch. This wasn't too surprising, because stun bolts were only effective when applied to the torso.)

For N, as he sat in his brightly-coloured antechamber/playroom at the top of the P.L.A.S.M.A Industries building, it was a nightmare come true. Not the playroom, although he'd been meaning to have words with the interior decorators about that, but the mob of Castelians storming his headquarters.

"Ghetsis, you don't suppose we've made a misjudgement, do you?" said N worriedly, addressing his rather scary-looking adoptive father as the building swayed and shook to the many explosions and poorly-aimed attacks coming from within.

"The only misjudgement was mine," Ghetsis snarled, avoiding eye-contact in order to make N feel isolated and afraid. "I assumed you might make for a halfway decent chosen one, but you've turned out to be the worst failure in years, "my boy". You are the most useless,

incompetent, foolish, naive, utterly pathetic little piece of charizard phlegm ever to walk the earth!"

"That's all well and good, but really, we should've anticipated a resistance movement like this. The only way to avert one would be to brutally oppress everyone, and that wouldn't be right," N pointed out, seemingly oblivious to Ghetsis's hatred.

"WOULDN'T BE RIGHT?! What kind of idiot are you?!" Ghetsis roared. "If we're to conquer Unova, so I can take it over and rule as- I mean, so you can protect all the pokÃ©mon, we've got to seize opportunities by the throat! Forget your moral qualms, boy! Kill everyone who dares to oppose you!"

"Ghetsis, this is getting us nowhere. If you don't approve of my methods, just say so," N invited him.

"Oh...! Fine!" Ghetsis looked N straight in the eye. "I... do... not... approve... of... your... methods. You guttersnipe."

"There, now. You've said it." N gave the oncoming dragon-riders a thoughtful look. "Now, the only problem you could possibly have with what I'm doing is that my methods are a bit too extreme, and to be honest, invading a city doesn't seem to be working. Perhaps we'd better-"

Wait. Dragon-riders?

"For Opelucid City!" Iris declared, brushing some of the strangely harmless shattered glass off her arm as she and Betty smashed through the window, alighting in front of N and Ghetsis.

Ghetsis rose to his feet in an unrighteous fury. "You meddling brat! How dare you come in here?! That window was expensive!"

"It's not just us," Iris pointed out, as Flygon broke through another bit of window, with Stacey leaping off his back even as he landed, getting her other pokÃ©-balls ready as she did so.

"There's four of you? But... the helicopters!" N wailed.

"I shorted them out, and the butterfrees surrendered," Zephyr explained, making a graceful leap in through the last bit of intact window.

"Zephyr's awesome!" Bianca informed anyone who cared to listen. "Thanks, Claribelle," she added, addressing her beloved munna, who had teleported her in.

"It matters not whether there are four of you or four thousand," said Ghetsis coldly, retrieving a long, ornate staff from under his robes. "I, Ghetsis Harmonia, am a master of dark aura, and your souls will be mine!"

"True, but yours'll be wet!" Blake declared, bursting in through the rather cheap, previously locked door, closely followed by Samantha. Both of them had a fully-formed water pulse ready to throw at whoever took their fancy.

N sighed. "Look, making a last stand here won't do us any good.

Besides, Colress might've revived a genesect strike team by now, and we need to be there. We're off!" So saying, he laid a hand on Ghetsis's shoulder, and before the other could protest, teleported them both away.

Bianca gasped in horror. "No! They got away!"

"Way to state the obvious..." Iris muttered.

"As the ugly one said, it matters not," Zephyr pointed out. "As of now, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will be enemies of the state, to be hunted down and convinced to stop being evil at all costs. Sooner or later, we will surely have a final confrontation with them."

"Sounds good to me," said Stacey. "Just one thing: what was that about Colress, and that genesect strike team?"

Bianca, Iris, Blake, Samantha and Zephyr looked at one-another.

"It's probably no big deal," Bianca decided. "Let's go and help incarcerate all the other P.L.A.S.M.A agents. Claribelle, do your stuff!"

"Munna mun!" said Claribelle.

"Since when could you pronounce 'incarcerate'?" Stacey muttered, as Claribelle teleported herself and Bianca back to the ground.

#### 14. Chapter 14: Skin of Horribleness

\*\*~Chapter Fourteen: Yonder lies the Desert Resort, Land of Hopes, Dreams, and Lots of Poisonous Ooze and Evil Pok  mon... Wait, What?~\*\*

"Cheren's log, Saturday the second of May: We have finally finished removing the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation from Castelia City, and have had plenty of time to examine a few new species of pok  mon. Templeton has evolved into a pignite, and our group has a new member: Zephyr, a talking zebstrika who proclaims herself to be the Daughter of the Storm. I fear our group may soon be unreasonably large, if this carries on. In any case, route 4 and the Desert Resort lie yonder, and we can tarry no longer; time and pok  mon wait for no man."

"Or woman!" Bianca, Zephyr, Stacey, Blake and Whitney declared loudly.

Cheren sighed. "Can't you just let it slide? I mean, no-one expects 'man' to be a gender-specific term any more, unless the context indicates that it is."

"I know our world's been quite fortunate in terms of gender equality, but saying 'man' all the time is the thin end of the wedge," Whitney pointed out.

"That's as may be, but... um... look, Whitney, isn't a bit stereotypical for a lesbian tomboy like yourself to be such an outspoken feminist?" Cheren pointed out.

"I'm bisexual, actually, and how's that a problem?!" Whitney demanded.

"It isn't one!" Stacey declared.

"Talking of which, shouldn't we be getting a move-on, before Cheren starts defending the ridiculous clothing female gym leaders seem to wear nowadays?" Blake interjected.

"Or a move-off," said Bianca sagely.

\* \* \*

><p>All around the large, extremely sandy valley rose wall-like mountains of brown stone, cutting the Resort off from the rest of Unova, bar a small mountain pass carved out by a prehistoric tribe of excadrills. On and off notwithstanding, it was but the work of several hours for our heroes to traverse route 4, fend off an ambush from vengeful P.L.A.S.M.A agents, and reach the entrance.<p>

"Well, this seems nicer than the average desert," Stacey commented, as the seven crossed the threshold to the Desert Resort.

"It isn't really," Whitney pointed out. "Most of the time, there are sandstorms."

"In that case, we may need an external source of water. I believe there was a barrel shop a bit further down the route. Blake, would you care to accompany me there, buy a barrel, help me fill it with water, and help me carry it back here?" asked Zephyr.

"Well, I'd love to, but why me, exactly?" asked Blake.

"Oh, no reason. Coming?" said Zephyr secretively.

Blake looked at Whitney. "You five'll be able to manage without me and her, right?"

"Probably," replied Whitney.

"I daresay," agreed Cheren. "In fact, it's probably best if you are out of the spotlight for a bit, as it were. You already look suspiciously similar to a certain-"

"Burgh's bad enough! I'll meet up with you at Relic Castle, all right? Come on, Zephyr, barrels await us!" shouted Blake, not angrily, but definitely with much emotion. He turned on his heel and walked briskly back down the route, with a quietly amused Zephyr trotting along beside him.

"All right," said Cheren, once boy and zebstrika had dwindled to a rapidly shrinking shape on the horizon. "Now that our water's pretty much taken care of, we should make for the ruins, set up camp, and begin our research on the desert pokÃ©mon."

"And I'll try to capture a sigilyph," declared Whitney, as the five resumed their passage into the desert, already feeling the soft, sun-baked sand underfoot.

"And I'll watch you with stars in my eyes!" said Stacey, taking

Whitney's hand. "Metaphorically, that is."

"Good, but that leaves just Bianca and I to fill the poké-dexes. Can the two of you not take your eyes off a sigilyph or each other long enough to help us?" Cheren insisted.

"Cheren, we're hardly indecent," said Stacey, looking a little hurt. "I mean, I'd have only a 3.285% probability of, for example, conspicuously kissing Whitney near anyone easily embarrassed."

"I'm not easily embarrassed," Bianca pointed out.

"Well, fine. Really, though, I don't know what we drag the two of you along f--"

With a cry of shock, Cheren slipped, falling flat on his back and almost squashing Durant.

"Oh, golly!" cried Bianca, falling to her knees beside her friend. "Cheren! Speak to me, old pal!"

"I'm perfectly all right, but thank you for your concern," said Cheren, sounding a little shaken. For Whitney and Stacey's benefit, he added, "I'm not usually this clumsy, but... what's this?"

"What's what?" asked Bianca, slightly confused.

"Tell us! We're approximately 100% ears!" declared Stacey.

"That purple slick?" Whitney guessed.

Cheren dipped a finger into a small pool of clear, purplish slime, which had somehow maintained its slipperiness enough to lay him low in spite of the sand. "This would appear to be- ow!" Cheren quickly whipped out his handkerchief and wiped off the slime, staring in amazement at the discoloured poison burns on his finger.

"Poor Cheren... This isn't your day, is it?" said Bianca sympathetically.

"It rarely seems to be," Stacey observed wryly.

"There's no doubt about it," said Whitney worriedly, examining the purplish slime. "This goo was made by a poison-type pokémon. We'd better watch our step going through the desert."

"Cheren's log, supplemental: I may never play the piano again," said Cheren absentmindedly, climbing carefully to his feet. "Whitney, you're something of a wild forest-dweller with bushy hair and tomboyish mannerisms, not to mention a pokémon companion who chooses not to stay in a poké-ball. I don't suppose you know any herbal remedies for poison damage?"

"Eating a pecha berry might help," said Whitney. "As to the herbal remedy stuff, do you see any herbs nearby?"

Cheren looked around at the dry, windswept sand, the craggy mountain-walls, and a distant sandstorm. "Not really," he admitted.



"It's just a little finger damage. You'll live," Stacey assured him. "Now, we'd best be pressing on. Whitney, care to hold my hand to stop me from slipping?"

"Of course!" Whitney chuckled, taking Stacey by the hand once more.

"We should probably do likewise," said Cheren, grasping Bianca's terminal forelimb digit retainer in his own. "As for durant..."

Durant gave a gentle squeak of perspicacity, climbing up onto Whitney's back.

"Aaaaargh! Too heavy!" wailed Whitney, trying desperately not to topple over into more poison, which was a very real concern. Durant quickly jumped off, looking ashamed.

\* \* \*

><p>"Well, this is a nice waterfall," Blake commented, as he and Zephyr came to a halt at the foot of a small but well-meaning waterfall, which was responsible for much of Castelia City's water supply. The river into which the water fell flowed right through the city, albeit mostly underground, but they wouldn't miss a barrel or two.<p>

"Where are your barrels, then?" asked Zephyr.

Blake blinked, then, not knowing what to say, blinked again.

"You know, your barrels?" Zephyr insisted. "Seeing as you're responsible for creation of meals, I would expect you to have a water barrel or two, or maybe a beer keg."

Blake continued to say nothing. Barrels?! Even with mass-dampening, ultra-high-capacity bags, water was heavy and barrels were cumbersome. They'd never really been short of water before, though; Blake had always assumed that, as a last resort, Samantha and Floella could create some out of thin air.

"Blake," said Zephyr severely, "do you mean to tell me that there are no water barrels in your possession?"

"Um... yes," Blake admitted.

"And when you heard that I intended to get water with you, you never stopped to think what we would put it in?"

"I thought you had something!"

"Where, exactly? I have no clothes, nor any bags, and I could only swallow a very small container."

"But you... I thought you knew what you were doing!" Blake protested. "How is this my fault, anyway?!"

"I am not blaming you for our lack of barrels," Zephyr assured Blake. "I am merely pointing out that you failed to consider the practicalities of gathering water. If you intend to be the hero of

truth, I would suggest you consider this stuff."

"Who says I want to be the hero of truth?!" Blake demanded.

"Me. Is that a problem?" asked Zephyr fiercely, drawing herself to her full height.

"You bet it is! You can't just come in here, make sexist remarks, declare me to be some truthful hero, then try to intimidate me!" Blake declared angrily. "Now are we getting water or aren't we?!"

"Um... I suppose we are," said Zephyr, calming down somewhat. "As to the water containers, I'm sure you have a few empty vessels about you."

"I have some," Blake conceded, taking an empty milk bottle and a small powder keg out of his bag. (Why he had the powder keg, we shall never know.)

A few minutes passed in silence as Blake tried to hold the powder keg under the waterfall, fell into the river, screamed and cursed at length, got out, dried himself, filled the keg, filled the milk bottle, dropped it on his foot, screamed again, swore again, called out Darren, got him to flame-dry his feet and trousers, and gave a deep, heartfelt sigh.

"This isn't a good day for my clothes, is it?" Blake commented, noticing the burn marks and residual dampness on his trousers.

"Daruma makumak," said Darren sympathetically.

"You know," said Zephyr casually, "there's a water shop about a mile away from here."

"There is? Why didn't you tell me?!" cried Blake.

"I am here for the hero of truth, not any boy of Nuvema Town," replied Zephyr.

Blake sighed. "If I were to be the hero of truth, what would happen?"

"You'd be a hero, of course," said Zephyr. "One who stands up for the truth."

"I suppose that won't be so bad..." said Blake. Then a thought occurred to him, and he couldn't help but giggle. "Come on, Storm Girl! Water awaits us!"

"Storm Girl?" said Zephyr, as Blake struck a dramatic pose.

"Truthful Boy to the rescue, albeit a moist one!" Blake went on, then he paused, contemplating the shards of milk bottle. "Just to be clear, are we going to the water shop, or back to the Desert Resort? And do I get a cape?"

\* \* \*

><p>By some strange coincidence, Blake was not the only one saying the word "cape" at that moment.<p>

"Just look at my cape! It's even more ruined than before!" wailed Cheren, staring in horror at his stricken cape, as the poisonous ooze burnt it to a crisp.

"It's your own fault for draping it over that pool of goo for us," Whitney commented. "All five of us can jump, right?"

"I was just trying to be gentlemanly..." Cheren muttered.

Now that the ground was getting more covered in ooze, with rivers of the stuff crisscrossing the desert, Durant was on point. Being part steel-type, he was immune to poison and acid, and so would not suffer too much if he stumbled into a hidden pool of slime. Nevertheless, Whitney had plenty of polish on hand.

As the group progressed, a few missteps were inevitable, and Bianca, whose trousers left a significant portion of her legs bare, suffered.

"What do you suppose my dad would say to me now?" Bianca pondered, stepping carefully over an unconscious dwebble. "Probably lots of swear words..."

"Oh my gosh, what happened to that poor dwebble?!" Whitney cried, lifting the limp, rock-dwelling insect pokémon up out of a small patch of poison. "Oh, you poor thing! Bianca, how could you not notice her?! How could Durant not notice?!"

"I was busy talking!" Bianca protested, as Stacey, Durant and Cheren examined the dwebble, looking concerned. She had fallen on her back, so, while most of her rock had dissolved, the dwebble herself wasn't too badly damaged. She was severely poisoned, though.

"We should have foreseen this," said Cheren gravely. "Obviously, the sudden appearance of poisonous slime in the Desert Resort would have a negative effect on the pokémon here."

"Well, duh! Stacey, you hold her," said Whitney, handing her precise soulmate the dwebble. As something of a bug expert, Stacey was the best choice of veterinarian.

The dwebble shifted slightly in Stacey's arms, whimpering softly as the poison went about its vicious, unthinking duty. Stacey felt her eyes mist up at the sight of such suffering, and her blood catch fire at the thought of whoever was responsible, assuming someone was.

"Everything's going to be fine, dwebble," Stacey assured the dwebble, cuddling the pokémon's limp body as tightly as she dared.

"Now, let's see. Where are my antidotes...?" Whitney muttered to herself, digging around inside her bag.

"Why can't nice things happen to us from time to time?" Bianca asked.

"No idea," replied Cheren.

"I mean, we live in a utopian society even better than the one in those science fiction programmes you love, we're young and free, I'm wearing a beret, you have a brown hat, we're friends with a boy called Blake, no-one minds that Stacey and Whitney fancy each other..." Bianca went on. While Cheren would generally have tuned out at about this point, he could see her point, and as such didn't.

"Here you go, dwebble. A nice, refreshing spray-on antidote!" declared Whitney, squirting the dwebble with some antidote, which settled in a fine, pink mist upon her exoskeleton.

"Dwebble dweb," said the dwebble, still weakly, but now satisfied.

"Yay! She's alive again!" declared Bianca.

"Dweb dwebble, dweb," said the dwebble, indicating that she never wasn't, although it felt like it at times.

"Jolly good group effort there," said Cheren, satisfied. "We can take this dwebble in tow if you wish, but now, we really must-"

There was a loud, booming roar, causing Whitney, Bianca, Stacey, Durant and the dwebble to look up in horror as a huge, furious gigalith rampaged across the desert, heading straight for them. Cheren merely sighed and retrieved Servine's pok  -ball.

The gigalith skidded to a halt in front of the group, examined them for a moment, then stepped past and continued on her way. Cheren shrugged, replacing the pok  -ball on his belt.

"Where do you suppose that pok  mon was going in such a hurry?" Bianca asked curiously.

"No idea, but as pok  mon researchers, it is our duty to find out," Cheren declared. "Stacey, stay here and protect the dwebble. Bianca, protect Stacey. Durant, Whitney, you're with me. Come on!"

Stacey, Bianca and the dwebble shared a companionable eye-roll, and the entire group dashed off after Cheren.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is a bit of a drag, isn't it?" Zephyr commented, hauling her wagonload of water barrels over a rut, with some help from Blake, Samantha, Darkblade, Darren, Lilly and Patrick. Lyoko was sunning himself on a rock. "I mean, after that Storm Girl remark, you should be the one pulling the barrels. Can't they fit in that bag of yours?"<p>

"Not all of them," said Blake, looking up from his careful arrangement of sticks under the wagon's wheel. "Once we reunite with the group, though, we can take one each. And I'll take the wagon back to the wagon rental shop."

"Whatever..." said Zephyr grumpily.

\* \* \*

><p>"Gigalith! Lith gigalith!" the gigalith roared, hurling a barrage of boulders at the three ferocious muks trying to halt her passage. As Whitney, Cheren, Bianca, Stacey and Durant crested the large dune conveniently located between them and the battlefield, they were not too surprised; pokÃ©mon were known to test their skills against one-another in the wild.<p>

However, the lake of poisonous ooze a little further away was a surprise even for Whitney's experienced eyes, and the family of sandiles, krokoroks and krookodiles lying dejectedly on an island in the lake almsost made her cry.

"Oh, those poor things! How could those poison blob thingies be so horrible to them?!" wailed Bianca, for whom there was no "almost". Her tears could fill a medium-sized thimble.

"Those poison blob thingies are muks, the sludge pokÃ©mon, scientific name Sludgium Horribulus, or Betbeton. A muk is a dangerous poison-type pokÃ©mon, capable of producing toxins that instantly kill plants and make humans and pokÃ©mon terribly unwell. Just brushing against one could potentially cripple you. Muks will readily consume nearly any waste or refuse, and can be found in heavily polluted bodies of water, where lunar rays create the grimers which evolve into them. Muk's greatest strengths are its attack and special defence. Its most powerful moves are sludge wave, gunk shot and belch, all of which are poison-type," said Stacey matter-of-factly.

"In a battle, a muk is at its best when facing a special attacker, such as a magneton. It isn't especially fast, but can endure quite a bit, then dish out physical attacks which could make most enemies weep. And don't let the deadly poison fool you; most muks are quite friendly and polite, and, if they can be trusted to keep their poison inside, great with children," Whitney added.

"Oh, I see," said Bianca.

"In any case, I think we can safely assume stopping them is in everyone's best interests. Onwards!" shouted Cheren. He paused in the act of rushing headlong at the muks, addressing Stacey. "If you're having doubts about dragging the dwebble into this, now's the time to make them known."

"I am having a few, actually," Stacey admitted. She took one of her pokÃ©-balls, speaking directly into it. "Skorupi, would you mind waiting here for a bit and looking after a dwebble?"

Evidently, the small, purple scorpion pokÃ©mon didn't mind; he materialised in good humour, with the obligatory flash of light.

"Dweb dwebble?" the dwebble asked nervously, as Stacey lowered her to the ground.

"Skorup," Skorupi assured her, looking protective.

"Wait here for us, all right?" said Stacey.

"Rupi skor," agreed Skorupi.

Stacey nodded at Cheren, who addressed the others. "Is everyone ready?"

"Yes," said Whitney, Bianca and Stacey.

Durant squeaked in acknowledgement.

"Good. That gigalith seems able to take care of herself, so we'll deal with the other muks emerging from the lake. In the name of Nuvema Town and wherever else some of us are from, charge!"

Cheren, Whitney, Stacey, Bianca and Durant rushed towards the lake of poison, from which eight more muks were emerging. Those particular muks did not look good with children; in fact, they looked like children were their favourite snack.

"Durant, you might as well start things up with iron defence," Whitney suggested, and Durant glowed silvery-grey, making his exoskeleton as solid as he could.

"Psychic- or steel-type pok  mon would be out best bet," Cheren agreed, "but, in their absence, Tranquill will suffice. I choose you, Tranquill!"

With that, he tossed Tranquill's pok  mon ball into the air, sending the bird pok  mon straight into his element, with a battle cry of "Tranquiiiiiiiiil!"

"In that case, Claribelle, stand by for battle!" declared Bianca, releasing Claribelle. The newly-minted musharna glared defiantly at the onwardly oozing muks.

"And I choose Pinsir!" Stacey finished, unleashing a mighty, ovoid pok  mon. She roared, thrusting her two massive horns skywards and showing off her terrifying vertical jaws.

"Might as well use light screen too," said Bianca. "Claribelle, could you?"

"Sharna," Claribelle agreed, and she projected a screen of solidified light in front of herself and her allies.

The strike team of muks were, as it turned out, pretty slow, so there was plenty of time for our heroes to get ready before they arrived. However, when the pok  mon had finished oozing over to the attackers, they did not hold back, instead hurling forth a barrage of sludge bombs and gunk shots.

"Aieeeeeee! That's a terrible light screen!" Whitney wailed, bowled off her feet by a barrage of sludge bombs. "Ugh... Durant, quick, use metal claw!"

Durant pounced on the nearest muk, lambasting him with his metallic claws.

"What a scream..." Stacey sighed, savouring each individual "e" in Whitney's "Aieeeeeee!". Then, noticing Pinsir almost being bowled over by a mud slap, her attention returned to the present. "Use

megahorn!"

Pinsir took hold of a muk with her surprisingly prehensile horns, roared once more for effect, and tossed the muk clean over the horizon, where she landed in among a group of beach-dwelling pokémon and started a new life.

"Claribelle did her best! It's not her fault or mine she isn't much of a light screener!" Bianca protested. "In any case, psybeam!"

Claribelle obligingly sent a beam of concentrated psychic energy at one of the muks.

"Aerial ace!" Cheren commanded simply, not wanting to get carried away with talking. They were fighting for their lives, for crying out loud!

"Quill! Tranquill!" Tranquill declared, and he flew straight into the muk recently metal clawed by Durant, knocking him out cold.

"We've got a good thing going, so no need to stop. Megahorn once more!" Stacey ordered, sending Pinsir as much of her confidence and spirit as she could muster (as you do). Pinsir hurled another muk over the horizon; this one ended up gatecrashing a P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation rally, and, after hearing both sides of the argument, lived a long and happy life with a human family.

The muks were still going strong, but with two missing and one unconscious, things were getting dire. A well-aimed gunk shot from one gave Claribelle pause for thought, but she shrugged it off, and in spite of Whitney's complaint, the light screen was doing wonders.

"You're doing wickedly, Durant, and in a good way! Now use dig!" Whitney commanded, the thrill of battle turning her even louder and more determined than usual. The same could be said of Durant, who gave a metallic shriek of righteous fury/disappointment at getting sand in his joints he disappeared beneath the desert, tunneled for a bit, came up under a muk and hurled her over the horizon.

This particular muk landed on a level crossing, causing traffic and public transport disruptions such as had not been seen for years.

"I believe it is time for our coup de grace. Use quick attack!" Cheren commanded, feeling a surge of triumph as Tranquill rushed at one of the few muks still standing, then bounced off, leaving him pretty much unscathed.

"Quick attack isn't actually an especially powerful attack," Whitney pointed out, seeing the look of disappointment on Cheren's face.

Cheren sighed, observing as the muk hurled a volley of mud shots at Tranquill. (None of them affected him, but it was still a little annoying.) "It's still a graceful coup. In any case, razor wind once more, please!"

Tranquill did so, sending razor-sharp wind at the muk, which knocked him for six.

"Not to say Tranquill isn't doing his best, but how'd you like to see a real coup de grace?" Whitney enquired.

"We'd love to!" said Bianca.

"Very well," said Cheren.

The single remaining muk, who had somehow managed to evade everything, cringed in fear. Durant grinned savagely.

"In that case, guillotine!" Whitney shouted.

Durant roared as best an insect could, a glowing red corona manifesting itself around his mandibles, and he flew at the muk, chomping down on her with all his might.

"Golly!" Stacey cried, which was fairly appropriate now.

Durant jumped nimbly off the muk, his mandibles returning to normal. The muk collapsed into a vaguely animate puddle of ooze, her swirly eyes indicating that she was out for the count.

Cheren smiled faintly. "Impressive."

"Oh, stop being such a tsundere. That was wickedly awesometastically mega-impressive!" Bianca cried, displaying her inability to use manga terminology properly.

"We do our best," said Whitney modestly.

"Pinsir sir, pins," Pinsir commented, clearly impressed.

"They are amazing, aren't they?" Stacey agreed.

"Gigalith lith!" the gigalith celebrated, standing over Skorupe and the recovering dwebble like a mountain over a couple of bug-shaped houses.

"Musharna sharna sharn mush musha..." muttered Claribelle. She hadn't seen that overgrown boulder helping out much.

"In any case, the desert is safe. Dwebble, you are free once more to... actually, there's still lots of poison. Fear not, young dwebble; as pokémon trainers, it is our solemn duty to help all pokémon. I mean, heaven knows, there are probably specialists capable of dealing with poisonous ooze in deserts, but..." Cheren realized he had lost the thread a bit. "In any case, the worst is over, and- there are still pokémon on that island, aren't there?"

Whitney gave Cheren a friendly pat on the back. "Got to it eventually."

"We've got to help, these poor, innocent pokémon!" Bianca said loudly, in case anyone present hadn't realised.

"Right. Now, given that we are in a desert, the logical thing to do is fill the lake of poison with sand," said Stacey.



"Or we could just wait for them to tunnel out," Whitney pointed out. "I mean, the sandiles, krokoroks and krookodiles are ground-type, so..."

"Speaking of which, we should probably call Blake and tell him about what happened," said Bianca.

"I fail to see how that "speaking of which" was necessary. You are right, however," Cheren conceded.

"And Professor Juniper," Bianca suggested.

"Yes, and her," said Cheren, digging out his cross-transciever.

"And I'll sent my brother a postcard," Whitney proposed. "Durant standing proudly upon a field of victory, with me standing behind him and looking ecstatic!"

"I might send my parents some of this sand..." Stacey pondered, running a handful of sand through her fingers.

"Gentlem...uh, ladies? Assorted tomboys, this is a desert, not a souvenir stand," Cheren pointed out archly.

"Durant's not an assorted tomboy," Whitney pointed out. "And nor are Tranquill or Skorupi, unless you want "tomboy" to be gender-neutral."

"Oh! Just... tell someone who cares!" snapped Cheren. He started intently working the buttons on his cross-transciever, his demeanour indicating "closed for business".

\* \* \*

><p>"This stuff is unbelievable!" Blake growled, as he, Zephyr and all the pokÃ©mon, Lyoko included, hauled the water wagon out of one of route 4's highly annoying tar pits.<p>

"\_Shut up and pull!\_" Samantha snapped.

"Well, pardon me for having an opinion..."

Fortunately, this particular tar pit wasn't feeling its best today, and soon relinquished the cart. Blake, Zephyr, Samantha, Lyoko, Lilly, Patrick, Darren and Darkblade breathed a synchronised sigh of relief.

"In future, perhaps we should make sure to camp near a river or an oasis," Blake proposed, once he'd got his breath back.

"Dier herdier," Lilly agreed.

"In the mean time, we'd best be getting along. Blake, I trust you have a polishing cloth or something about you?" said Zephyr.

Blake stared at her.

"No? Well, no matter. Samantha, could I impose upon you to cleanse this wagon with your water-type powers?"

"Wott dewott wott," Samantha conceded, and she spewed out a carefully directed water gun, washing off much of the tar.

"I do have some tea towels, actually," said Blake, taking one from his bag. "These should help dry up- um, excuse me one moment."

Blake retrieved his cross-transciever, answered it, and was slightly disconcerted to see poison burns all over Cheren's hat.

"Ah, Blake, good day. We have much to discuss," Cheren declared.

"Cheren... your hat..." said Blake carefully.

"My hat? What's...?" Cheren took off his hat and gave it a cursory examination. His eyes went as wide as saucers. "Arceus preserve me! Those muks had a better aim than I thought."

"Muks? They're... they're from Kanto. Cheren, what exactly happened?" asked Blake, not altogether sure he wanted to know the answer.

"It's quite simple, yet at the same time, fairly complex. It all started when..."

**\*\*Much time passes:\*\***

"...And that is the complete story of how I came to damage my hat, and how you really ought to have got here a bit sooner with that amazing zebstrika."

"Wow." Blake could think of no other word to describe Cheren's story. The part where he defeated twelve muks bare-handed sent shivers down Blake's spine, and the part where Whitney, Stacey, Bianca and the gigalith all fell in love with Cheren was unbelievable, not least because of Stacey's romantic preferences. "How much of that is true, exactly?"

"Not much," replied Cheren. "Anyway, we've established diplomatic relations with the desert pokÃ©mon, and will be waiting in Relic Castle for you. It is my intent after that to- yes, what is it, Bianca?"

"I found this mysterious diary lying on the ground," Bianca informed Cheren, barging into the video feed and showing him the diary. "It's got 'property of Colress' on it."

"Really?" Cheren leafed through the diary, looking increasingly concerned as he did so. "Oh, my. Blake, Zephyr, everyone, you'd better get here fast. The artisan of my hat's destruction..." Cheren paused dramatically, "is none other than the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation!"

"Golly gosh! How could they?!" cried Bianca.

"They're evil," Cheren replied.

"No, seriously, how could they? The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation wouldn't set these sorts of pokÃ©mon loose on the desert! Unless they liberated them and couldn't find a better place, or these muks were some sort of secret weapon."

"True, but that is not the case. Um..." Cheren had another quick look at the diary. "The muks seem to be a by-product of something called the Genesect Project."

"Genesect?! N mentioned something about them, didn't he?" Blake commented.

"Indeed," said Cheren. "The muks were created from the poison-type DNA removed from the prehistoric genesects, in order to make room for steel-type DNA needed to perfect the genesect warriors. These muks were effectively sloughed off so that the genesects could become the ultimate warriors." Cheren turned dramatically to face the desert sun, screamed, covered his eyes, turned away, and cleared his throat. "They were, in effect... a skin of evil!"

"No, they weren't a skin of evil. More sort of a group of blobs of poison," Bianca pointed out.

"Submitting to them would be the true definition of evil!" Cheren declared, completely ignoring Bianca. "They killed Whitney!"

Blake's eyes widened in horror. "K-killed her?!"

"He's exaggerating," Bianca assured Blake. "She's just a little sludge bombed."

"In any case, I shall need to communicate with Professor Juniped. Do hurry up and get here," said Cheren superciliously.

"We'll be there within... let's say twelve hours, or maybe thirteen," said Blake, thinking it best to make a conservative estimate.

"Then make it so. Cheren out," Cheren replied, deactivating his cross-transciever.

Blake sighed. "I never shouldn've got him those DVDs..."

## 15. Chapter 15: Templeton's Awakening

\*\*~Chapter Fifteen: Enter Sigilyph and Boldore (minus Lyoko), then Nimbasa City, and the Dawn of the Magnificent Many~\*\*

\*\*Author's Note:\*\*

In this chapter, the word "football" is used. As I am British, this refers to the game sometimes known as "soccer", in which two teams of eleven kick a ball around, attempting to get it into a net. It does not refer to American football, nor Australian rules.

\*\*Now, on with the story:\*\*

"Lyoko, use fury swipes!"

The arrogant purrlain set about delicately licking his paw, gazing dispassionately at the boldore Blake was trying to capture.

"Well, in that case, assurance!" Blake commanded, noticing with some alarm that the craggy, tripedal pokémon was wandering off.

"Loin purr," Lyoko sniffed. "Purrloin purr purrloin loin-purrloin."

The boldore stopped in her tracks, turning a furious, geometric-looking eye upon Lyoko. "Boldore boldORE-ore bold boldore?!"

Blake glared at his reluctant purrloin. "Oh, you've done it now." Addressing the boldore, he added, "Look, Georgina, don't blame Lyoko. He's... well... maladjusted?"

Ignoring him, Lyoko flung himself at the boldore, raking his claws across her supposedly mineral flesh. No sooner had she finished wailing in agony when Lyoko sent a dark pulse right into her face, followed by a flurry of assurances, then some fury swipes, then another dark pulse.

"Lyoko, stop it! You're not supposed to cripple her!" Blake cried.

"\_Oh, so first you're desperate for me to attack, then you want me to restrain myself? Get real,\_" Lyoko scoffed.

Blake couldn't understand him that well, but he got the gist, and promptly broke out in a cold sweat. "Lyoko, please..."

"\_I owe you nothing, you overgrown primeape. You want me to weaken this boldore for you? Fine. Just don't complain when I start hurting her,\_" Lyoko declared. "\_If you don't like my methods, you're perfectly welcome to replace me with a minccino, or some other pathetic little girl's pokÃ©mon.\_"

That was the last straw for Blake. "Lyoko, I've had it up to here with you! No respect, no honour, and now sexism?! Girls can train any kind of pokÃ©mon, and they're not pathetic!"

"\_I... I was referring to any pokÃ©mon possessed by a pathetic little girl. I didn't mean-\_"

"Muzzle it." Blake turned his gaze upon Georgina. "Georgina, we don't need him. Let's run away together, you and I! Or something."

"\_Hey, now hold on...!\_"

"Boldore...?" Georgina contemplated Blake. "Boldore bold boldore."

"Awesometastic!" Blake declared.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, you finally decided to turf Lyoko out?" Cheren gave Blake a suspicious look. "This raises some rather deep ethical questions, my young friend."<p>

"I know, I know," Blake sighed.

"How much loin would a purrloin purr if a purrloin could purr loin?" Bianca asked curiously.

Cheren sighed. "I was thinking of something along the lines of "are pokémon yours to capture and dismiss at will"?"

"As much loin as a purrlain would purr if a purrlain could purr loin," Bianca finished, looking proud of herself.

"He pretty much dared me to send him away," Blake pointed out, ignoring Bianca. "And Georgina didn't seem too discouraged."

"Ah, your new boldore. How typical: exchange one pokémon for another," said Cheren disapprovingly.

"What? I didn't-!" Blake was starting to feel hot under the collar. "Cheren, he didn't have the slightest vestige of respect for me. I don't want to be a god or anything-"

"Good to know," said Zephyr. "Hero of legend is the closest you'll get."

"-but a little respect isn't too much to ask, is it?" Blake finished. "I mean, as a pokémon trainer, I should be able to train pokémon, shouldn't I? Unless we've been getting it wrong, and we're supposed to drive trains with pokémon on them..." Blake sighed. "There seem to be a lot of right answers which are wrong at the same time."

"Hence "a thousand shades of grey"," Bianca pointed out. "I'd say this was pretty certain, though. Lyoko was really horrible."

"Quite," said Cheren. "In any case, Cheren's log, Wednesday the sixth of May: Blake, Bianca and I have been discussing high-minded stuff, and have reached a valid ethical conclusion, vis a vis, not really coming up with anything. The muks have been handed over to the custody of Nimbasa City's police, who intend to pursue the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. We have completed our study of all the pokémon of the Desert Resort: sandiles, krookodiles, krokoroks, maracti, goletts, golurks, yamasks, cofagrighuses, boldores, gigaliths and sigilyphs."

There was a loud, psychic explosion a short way away, and those few window panes still somehow intact in Relic Castle promptly shattered.

"Speaking of," Cheren went on, "Whitney is attempting-"

A psywave hurtled wildly overhead, smashing into the ground right next to a krokorok busy clearing up some of the poison. He stared at the impact crater for a moment, then passed out.

Cheren went pale. "Good heavens! Er, anyway, we're off to Nimbasa City, assuming nothing else goes wrong. End log. WHITNEY, WHAT THE DISTORTION REALM IS GOING ON OVER THERE?!"

"That poor krokorok! Is he alright?" Blake asked worriedly.

"It doesn't matter! Whitney's life could be-"

"I've done it!" Whitney declared, striding jauntily over to the

three, with Durant in tow. In her hand was a poké-ball. "There's nothing like being beaten up by a Durant to make a sigilyph want to go on a journey with someone called Whitney."

"That's great!" Bianca declared. "Although if we didn't know so much about Pokémon psychology, it'd be a little disturbing."

"True," said Whitney.

"What about the Krokorok?!" Blake demanded.

"Rok kroko krok Krokorok," said the Krokorok shakily.

Blake smiled, somewhat relieved. "Well, the psywave probably dissipated a little before it hit. Listen, whatever your name is, even if it's just Krokorok, if you ever have problems with poison, just look for Cheren, Bianca, Blake, Whitney, Stacey, Samantha, Templeton..." Blake began counting the names off in his fingers, "Servine, Durant, Weezing, Duosion, Georgina, that sigilyph, Floella, Lilly, Patrick, Darren..." Blake had run out of fingers. "Darkblade, George, Claribelle, Perdita, Tranquill, Sawk, Herdier, Pinsir, Flygon, Skorupi... um."

"Galvantula, Scyther, Leavanny, Larvesta and Beedrill," Stacey finished for him, jogging over to the group from her previous vantage point on top of Relic Castle. "Oh, Whitney, I'm so happy for you!"

Stacey gave Whitney a hug, which the latter gladly returned, while Durant nuzzled their ankles.

"We need a team name," Blake muttered.

"It's mostly thanks to Durant," Whitney pointed out. "But we're both glad you're happy."

"What about Cheren and the Cherenettes?" Cheren whispered to Blake. "Or Cheren's Angels."

"Or the Anti-Plasma League!" declared Bianca. "Or Team Juniper, after Professor Juniper."

"Well, those are reasonable ideas, but we need something a bit more... magnificent. There are many of us, so--"

"I've got it!" Stacey declared, startling Whitney a little. "The Magnificent Many!"

\* \* \*

><p>When Zephyr joined the group outside the Desert Resort (where she had been talking the hind limbs off a group of maracti), she wasn't entirely thrilled with "the Magnificent Many", but by the time they reached Nimbasa City, the name had stuck.<p>

"Holy magikarps!" Bianca saw fit to comment, suddenly hit by the incredible brightness and variety of colour the city presented. Myriad bright, well-crafted houses rose above the Many as soon as they crossed through the city's southern gate, almost as if the whole place was taken straight from a child's painting. "This city

is..."

"Resplendent? Superlative? Sumptuous? Pulchritudinous? Illustrious?" Cheren offered.

"Awesometastic," Bianca informed him.

"It's a good thing I came up with that word, isn't it?" Blake commented. Underneath his banter, however, he was awestruck; everybody in the city looked happy, no-one seemed to lack anything to do, and the sound! Either there was some sort of musicians' gathering going on, or Nimbasa City was the noisiest and most lyrical city in the world.

"We're not entirely here for our own enjoyment, though," Zephyr pointed out.

"True. There are the pok dexes," Cheren pointed out.

"And the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation," Zephyr pointed out. "They're bound to be stirring up trouble here, and it is our solemn duty to defeat them."

"Since when?" Stacey asked.

"Since we became pok mon trainers," Cheren replied.

"In any case, can we go to the football stadium? They let the public use it on Wednesdays, and I love football!" said Whitney. "I'm only really good at cricket, but kicking a black-and-white ball's easily my preference."

"I believe they also have a public tennis court. If anybody wishes to face me in a noble duel of raquettemanship, I will accept all comers," said Cheren smoothly. "Or womanship, of course."

Samantha burst out of her pok ball with an enthusiastic cry of "Wott dewott! Dewott dewott!"

"You, Samantha? Very well," said Cheren.

"I'll probably just watch," said Blake unsurely.

"Then can we see the big wheel?" asked Bianca, hugely excited. "And the musical theatre and the subway and the gym and the department store and the restaurants and the observatory and the cheese warehouse and the airport and the nightclubs-"

"Nightclubs?! I don't know what these new friends of yours have been teaching you about them, but nightclubs are no place for a fourteen-year-old!" came a loud, angry, strangely familiar voice from a short way away. The group looked around in amazement to see Mr Redwood approaching them, followed by a rather concerned Professor Juniper.

"Dad! It's so wonderful to see you, even though I've video called you every night since I left and you're really angry for some reason!" Bianca declared, and she ran over and hugged Mr Redwood. "And this city has special nightclubs which don't serve alcohol."

"Well... great. Listen, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation haven't been giving you any trouble, have they? Only a couple of them attacked Nuvema Town a few nights ago," Mr Redwood informed everyone.

"That's terrible! No-one got hurt, did they?" Blake asked worriedly.

"And surely they would not see such a small town as a threat," Cheren commented.

"Well, they did," Professor Juniper pointed out.

Stacey, Whitney and Zephyr shared a look of concern.

"Normally, me and Ravyn would've sorted them out, but one of the attackers was an unnaturally powerful pokÃ©mon. He went by the name of Tracey, and he somehow fought all my fiercest pokÃ©mon to a standstill," said Mr Redwood gravely.

"And took them away?!" cried Bianca, horrified.

"No, but he tried, even when they begged to be allowed to stay with me. He said he was going to-!" Mr Redwood stopped abruptly. "I... I'm sorry, it was... oh, Aegislash, Greninja, Klefki, Noivern and Trevenant, I can't live without you!"

"Are you all right?" asked Bianca worriedly, laying a hand on her father's trembling shoulder.

"Of course I'm not!" Mr Redwood snapped.

"That's so awful. If I ever lost Durant or anyone..." Whitney looked momentarily disturbed, then furious. "There's no way the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will ever get past me, or hopefully anyone!"

"I was hoping you'd say that," said Professor Juniper. "Just last night, this very city was attacked by a pokÃ©mon much like Tracey. Tell me, have you ever heard of genesects?"

"Genesects?" said Bianca worriedly.

"We've heard quite a lot about them, actually," said Whitney. "Too much."

"Oh." Professor Juniper and Mr Redwood shared a worried look. "Perhaps we'd better find somewhere for a long, detailed chat and a safety briefing."

\* \* \*

><p>"Well. That's a lot of interesting stuff you just told me," said Professor Juniper, carefully setting down her glass of finest Kalosian lemonade. "I can't help but feel that there may have been some exaggeration, though. Cheren, did you and Servine really battle Giratina?"<p>

"No," replied Cheren shamelessly.

Professor Juniper sighed. "Cheren, how can I know you haven't filled the pokÃ©dex servers with overblown nonsense?"



"Because, unlike some, I have honour!" Cheren retorted grandly.

"In any case," said Mr Redwood, "if what you say is true, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation seriously lacking in foresight. Unleashing poison-type pokémon on the Desert Resort won't help their cause, and they would pose a serious health hazard. As to the genesects, if the poisoniness removed from them is that dangerous..."

"They weren't actually that powerful," Whitney pointed out.

"They may not have been, but the fact remains that they pretty much ruined the Desert Resort. And if there were that many muks, there must be at least five genesects!" Mr Redwood declared.

As if on cue, there was a sudden thunderclap.

"Zephyr..." Blake sighed.

"Say what you like, I'm an artist!" Zephyr retorted.

Professor Juniper cleared her throat. "The police have posted guards all around the city, and we've recruited a local flock of rufflets and braviaries to patrol the skies. Tracey could fly, so he, and presumably the other genesects, could attack this city from anywhere. And if they do, we'll need to be ready."

"And take no unnecessary risks," Mr Redwood advised everyone. "From what I've seen, the genesects have a moral code completely different from ours, and have no qualms about killing, or worse."

"Worse?!" cried Bianca.

"I'm just guessing," Mr Redwood assured her. "We know they have one weakness, though: genesects are bug- and steel-type pokémon."

"So they're extremely weak to fire," said Cheren, cottoning on. "This means fire-type pokémon, such as Darren and Templeton, will be invaluable."

"Er... Templeton's needed at the pokémon centre to watch over everyone injured in the last attack," said Mr Redwood quickly. "Bianca had probably better stay as well. I know being a doctor is a challenging profession, but it's about time she spread her wings."

"They're already spread," Bianca pointed out. "But if everyone thinks it wise, I'll stay."

"I think it deeply unwise, actually. We need Templeton, and we also need Bianca," said Zephyr.

"In that case, Templeton and I shall... do whatever we need to do," said Bianca.

"Well... fine. Go and die however you want! Dive into a volcano! Stand on a level crossing! See if I care!" snapped Mr Redwood.

"What are you talking about?! I won't die!" Bianca retorted. "For your information, I think about not being killed a lot. It would

pretty much be the end of my life if I died."

Mr Redwood glared at her. "Some daughter you are..."

"Meaning it's her duty to make you feel happy and fatherly as long as she lives?" Blake pointed out.

"Er, well... I'm just worried is all," Mr Redwood pointed out. "I mean, is it really wise to have a teenage girl with no experience fighting go up against the fiercest pok  mon we've ever met?"

"She won't be doing the actual fighting," Stacey reminded him.

"That's right," Bianca concurred. "Besides, I have a beret."

\* \* \*

><p>"So then, you three," said Ghetsis mysteriously, addressing the three half-formed genesects in large, transparent cylinders of some sort of liquid, "will you be this old warrior's path to fame and fortune, or lack thereof?"<p>

One of the genesects gave him a dangerous look, indicating that they were in it to protect pok  mon, not make him famous or rich.

"Is that a dangerous look indicating that you're in it to protect pok  mon, not make me famous or rich?" Ghetsis chuckled. "You'll change your tune when you realise-"

"Hold it right there, Ghetsis!" came a loud, angry shout, and Melissa dropped down from the ceiling to land squarely in front of Ghetsis.

"M-Melissa! I... this is a... I like your new hairdo," said Ghetsis, in a small voice, noting the warrior's four orange ponytails.

"Well, that's good," said Melissa, "but don't think I haven't figured out your plans. We know there's a traitor high up in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation."

"Er, well... have you any idea who it is?" asked Ghetsis hopefully.

"Nope," replied Melissa, "but you pretending to be evil so they'll feel they can come to you won't necessarily work."

"Pretending?! I mean... of course! That's what I'm doing," said Ghetsis, relief flooding over him. "I... wasn't sure it would work really, but we've got to do something, haven't we? I mean, if we ever get around to awakening Reshiram, we'll need to know everyone can be trusted."

"Fair enough," said Melissa. "When do you think the other two'll get back from Nuvema Town and Nimbasa City, anyway?"

"Probably quite soon. The former regional champoin of Kalos will probably be quite tough to defeat, but once they kidnap his daughter, he's bound to crumble."

\* \* \*

><p>"HOW DARE YOU TRY TO KIDNAP BIANCA?!" Mr Redwood screamed, and he thwacked the now unconscious genesect with Cheren's walking stick as soon as Samantha, Templeton and Servine got out of the way. "See, Bianca?! This is what happens when Kalosian immigrants with pigtails try to defend Nimbasa City!"<p>

The barely-conscious rufflet who had first alerted them to the genesect's presence gave a gentle coo of agreement.

"It was me and Templeton who defeated him," Bianca pointed out.

"You were just lucky!" Mr Redwood scoffed. "Next time, it won't be half as easy."

"Ah, so you admit there will be a next time!" said Bianca triumphantly.

"Well... it happens from time to time..." said Mr Redwood, in a small voice.

The two of them, as well as Cheren, Blake and all their pokÃ©mon, now formed a team known as Strikeforce Mostly Blokes, and at Mr Redwood's behest, they had full body armour. Whitney, Stacey, Zephyr and Professor Juniper were Strikeforce Entirely Birds.

"Anyway, we'd better examine it," said Cheren, retrieving his pokÃ©dex. "A quick scan should give us a fair impression of its phenotype. By the way, I should like to have my staff back, if you're finished."

Mr Redwood nodded absentmindedly, handing over the stick. "Let's see, now. Green skin, red patches, two pairs of wings, six legs, two small wings on the tail, black spikes, large eyes... oh, for- this isn't a genesect! It's a bloomin' yanmega!"

"...Ah, yes. I did think it looked a bit un-genesecty," Cheren commented, feeling slightly foolish.

"Well, that explains how easily we fought it," Mr Redwood agreed.

"Still, why would a yanmega try to kidnap me?" Bianca commented.

"Because I dared him to," said the real genesect.

There was a moment of tense silence. Blake, suddenly in the grip of terror, reached down for Samantha's hand. She took his gladly.

"So, you've shown yourself at last, genesect!" Cheren declared fiercely. "What have you to say for yourself, attacking this city as you did?"

"Be silent, you pathetic excuse for a human," said the genesect, with quiet menace. She was terrifying: a two-metre-high purple insect, all blades and spikes and harder-than-steel carapace, complete with massive claws on her hands and feet and a cannon on her back. "I am Britney, emissary of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, and I have come to

eradicate human rule. In the age of the genesepts, there was no distinction between humans and pok  mon, and I don't like this future one bit. If you surrender now-

"Oh, shut your trap!" snapped Bianca, leading Mr Redwood to turn as pale as a vanillish. "You come in here, smash up houses, attack people, break stuff, bully humans, take away pok  mon and force us to fit in with your twisted ideology, and you call yourself heroes?! You will never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever take over this region!"

"All the same, we could do with more pok  mon in government..." Blake pointed out.

Cheren raised an eyebrow. "Who's side are you on?"

"Ours! I just don't think we should ignore the other one, is all."

"If you consider me the 'other side', then we are enemies," Britney pointed out. "And I will not show your idiot dewott any mercy either."

"I can't believe her name rhymes with our friend's name..." Cheren muttered.

"The other one was called Tracey, wasn't he?" Mr Redwood pointed out. "In any case, this situation calls for a simple plan: hit the genesept with everything we've got." He reached for his five pok  -balls. "Prepare for battle!"

Aegislash, Greninja, Klefki, Noivern and Trevenant burst into the material plane, took one look at Britney, and hid behind Mr Redwood. The three Nuvema Town children took a few steps back also.

Mr Redwood sighed. "I know you're scared, but it'll be different this time. Just like when we battled the president of Kalos over his lax attitude to safety regulations, all right?"

"Gren-greninja..." the ninja-frog pok  mon said unsurely, but she took her place in front of Mr Redwood nonetheless, the other pok  mon reluctantly following.

"Five pok  mon to die for your glory?" Britney asked. "I will show no mercy. Those stupid enough to serve humans deserve no-"

"Shadow ball! Hydro pump! Metal sound! Dark pulse! Razor leaf!" Mr Redwood retorted, and the five pok  mon thre everything they had at Britney. Holding a steely arm up to defend herself, the genesept was nonetheless pushed back by the onslaught.

As soon as the attack had finished, Britney's back-cannon glowed bright purple and spewed out a beam of concentrated energy, whiter than a very white thing (which nonetheless respects and admires other colours), and as powerful as a hyper beam.

Mr Redwood's eyes widened. "Quick, use mat block! Aegislash, assume your defence form!"

Aegislash stowed his animate sword section to reveal his shield, and

Greninja whipped a soft, strong mat out of nowhere, catching the attack in midair. It went straight through, knocking poor Greninja out instantly and sending Aegislash skittering across the ground.

"Oh, no..." Mr Redwood groaned. "Right, I think a close quarters attack would be better. You three lend some ranged support."

"Right," Blake, Bianca, Cheren, Samantha, Servine and Templeton agreed, perfectly synchronised even though some of them were speaking in a different language.

"Use dragon claw, wood hammer and gyro ball!" Mr Redwood commanded.

"Water pulse!" Blake shouted.

"Incinerate!" Bianca ordered, nudging Templeton to make sure he was awake.

"Leaf storm!" Cheren politely requested.

In response, Britney grabbed the onrushing Noivern, shoving the dragon bat straight into the path of Samantha's water pulse. It hit her side-on, sending her reeling into Trevenant, whose wood hammer thumped Klefki to within an inch of his life. The incinerate and leaf storm struck home, but Britney barely felt it, instead sending Mr Redwood's two still-conscious pok  mon flying with a brutal metal claw.

"It... wasn't different this time..." Mr Redwood muttered. "Return, Greninja, Aegislash, Klefki, Trevenant and Noivern."

"In that case, time for my plan," Bianca declared, looking more serious than she had been in years.

"You have a plan?!" Blake cried.

"Sure I have. Templeton, use dig!" Bianca ordered. Templeton, by now close enough with Bianca to feel her thoughts, knew exactly what he needed to do, and dove straight into the ground. Watched by a dumbfounded Britney, he zoomed in and out of the ground around her, surrounding her in holes. He emerged in front of the genesect, looking proud.

"I think I understand your plan. Water gun!" Blake commanded.

"Dewott!" Samantha said happily, having clearly caught on as well. Just as Britney was about to vaporise her out of sheer boredom, the dewott spat out a stream of water straight into the nearest hole, causing countless streams to spew out of the holes around Britney, reconvening into one stream above her head.

"What in the-?!" the might genesect cried.

"Flamethrower!" Bianca commanded as soon as Samantha had finished. Templeton took a deep breath and exhaled a roaring column of fire straight into the hole.

"AAAARGH!" Britney screamed, surrounded and coralled by the raging inferno. For a steel- and bug-type pokémon, there could be no worse situation.

When the fire finished, everyone could see Britney was starting to feel the heat, so to speak. Her steely exoskeleton was charred and scratched, but her eyes were still glowing bright red, which was never a good sign.

"Templeton, return!" Bianca cried, with admirable timing, as Britney chose the very next moment to blast him with zap cannon. He barely dematerialised in time.

"Let's see, now..." Bianca muttered. "All right, Floella, let's go!"

"She's got the right idea," Blake agreed. "Samantha, return, not that I doubt your ability to keep fighting." Samantha gracefully dematerialised. "Go, Georgina!"

"So, a frillish and a boldore..." Britney commented, as the two flashed into existence in front of her. "What could you be- OW!"

"It may not have been a plan, but they gave Servine plenty of time to charge up a quick solar beam," Cheren smiled, giving Servine an approving look.

"Gnnnnrrrrrrgh!" Britney eloquently stated, gingerly feeling her smouldering shoulder. "Eat techno blast, you fatheads!"

"Use protect, then rock blast!" Blake commanded, and Georgina leapt straight into the path of Britney's vicious attack, deflecting it all effortlessly. Barely skipping a beat, she fired off a barrage of little rocks at the genesect.

"Ominous wind!" Bianca agreed.

"And leech seed!" Cheren ordered.

"Feeling kinda superfluous..." Mr Redwood muttered.

Britney could only look on in terror as a blast of ghotly power flowed over her, shaking her to the core, and a leech seed embedded itself in her carapace, spreading vines across her body. She staggered as the energy started draining out.

"I don't suppose you feel like surrendering?" Cheren enquired of Britney.

"Never!" she snarled. "I swore I would sooner die than surrender, and to that I hold. Do you know what my most powerful attack is, by any chance?"

"Please enlighten us," said Mr Redwood levelly.

Britney grinned savagely. "Selfdestruct!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Well now, it's a good thing I thought to have us all wear body armour, is it not?" Mr Redwood asked smugly, as he and the children lugged the unconscious genesect over to the pokÃ©mon centre.<p>

"True enough," Blake agreed, noting the severe charring on his and the others' armour. "Why would she think using selfdestruct would be fatal, though? I mean, dying simply isn't the done thing nowadays."

"She must just be stupid," Mr Redwood replied. "Speaking of which... Bianca, you demonstrated great bravery and competence in that battle, as did Templeton. You must have raised him well."

"Really?! Yay! I'm so glad to hear you say that!" Bianca declared, rushing over to hug Mr Redwood.

"Aaaargh! Don't let go!" Cheren wailed, the prone genesect falling from his hands to land on his foot.

"Sorry," said Bianca sheepishly.

\* \* \*

><p>"So this is the creature who smashed up our fair city last night..." the woman commented, her gleaming azure irises gently sweeping over the now thoroughly shackled genesect, Britney. The woman was Elesa, Nimbasa City's gym leader, and quite possibly the most beautiful person in the world. Her yellowy blonde hair was short and smooth, framed by a pair of stylish headphones, complete with sleek black tendrils which went right down to her knees. And what knees! Encapsulated by sleek, tight black trousers, they perfectly connected her slender, muscular thighs with her muscular, slender calves, themselves leading to feet rendered almost vertical by a pair of yellow high-heeled shoes. Her arms were as smooth and healthily toned as a scyther's blade, with flawless ivory skin draped languidly over such muscles as even a lumberjack would be proud of. And her tight, sleeveless yellow blouse was-<p>

"Blake, you're staring," Cheren muttered.

"What?! No, I was... I wasn't! I was lost in... thought?" said Blake sheepishly.

Well, this wasn't like him at all! Whitney could understand Cheren going completely bananas over beautiful women, or possibly Stacey if she didn't already have such a wonderful girlfriend, but Blake? Calm, sensible, not-much-more-childish-then-necessary-in-general Blake?! There was only one thing for it: she'd have to be the main focus of the story for a bit.

"So then, Britney, what do you have to say for yourself?" Elesa enquired of the creature.

"Teleport," Britney retorted, and she was gone in a flash.

There was a long, awkward silence. Whitney could not believe her eyes. After all the trouble Strikeforce Primarily Blokes had gone to, how could Britney just teleport away?!

Durant laid a comforting limb on Whitney's leg, just above the wellington boot. "Durant-ant? Ant durant dura."

Whitney couldn't help but smile. "That's the first time you've said your name in years."

"How dare she flee like this?!" cried Mr Redwood furiously. "To desert us now, after stringing us along all this time?!"

"It's not a complete loss, though," Professor Juniper assured the assembled pok mon, pok mon trainers, scientists and gawpers. "I managed to get some detailed scans of the genesect. She comes from an extinct 300-million-year-old pok mon species, the apex predators of their time. The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation made her purple and added the cannon, though."

"Funny, that," Stacey commented. "You wouldn't think they'd create pok mon to fight for them, then make it so they'd care more about victory than their own lives. I estimate only a 26.538% chance that the genesects are entirely as planned."

"Anyway," said Elesa, "we know what to look out for now, so Nimbasa City should be well protected. It's probably time for dinner now, but tomorrow, I'll take all comers-"

"I'm in!" Blake declared.

"...For a game of tennis," Elesa finished, looking amused. "I only do gym battles on weekends and Mondays. And as for going on dates with fourteen-year-olds who, according to my colleague, are copying that Kantonian boy, I'm afraid it isn't going to happen."

Blake turned as red as a very red thing, which nevertheless respects and admires other colours.

## 16. Chapter 16: An Electric Pun Battle

**\*\*~Chapter Sixteen: Some Exciting Stuff Happens in Nimbasa City, then Professor Juniper Meets her Predecessor~\*\***

"Cheren's log, Sunday the tenth of May: While I rarely use such unrefined slang, least of all invented by a certain boy I have known for the entirety of my life, the only word which can adequately describe our time in Nimbasa City is "awesometastic". The aforementioned boy has fallen madly in love with Elesa, but seems to be more his usual self lately, so it is probably safe for us to challenge her for the bolt badge. I have played tennis so often of late that my elbow barely works, although Elesa still exceeds my skill, and Whitney and Stacey seem inclined to spend most of their time in the big wheel, gazing out into the glorious Nimbasa City skyline on the way up and presumably kissing each other a lot on the way down. As for Bianca, she and her father have the same relationship as always, albeit on slightly better terms. And as to Professor Juniper's mission, we have found a few pok mon species we previously missed, and everyone here has been most accomodating of our research."

Cheren fell silent for a few moments, his face screwed up in concentration.



"Cheren, are you all right?" Bianca asked worriedly.

"Er, yes. Just committing my log to long-term memory," Cheren reassured her.

"Are you sure you're not a robot in disguise?" Whitney asked, not entirely as a joke.

"Definitely sure, more's the pity," Cheren replied. "Now then, shall we face Elesa?"

"Oh, yes, let's!" Whitney declared, instantly forgetting about making fun of Cheren.

"I shall demonstrate my undying love for Elesa by vanquishing her pokémon with ease!" Blake agreed.

"Really? That doesn't seem to work with Whitney..." said Stacey unsurely.

"That's because losing rankles with me," Whitney pointed out. "For a gym leader, losing to the occasional challenger is part of the job. But really, I don't think courting Elesa is a good idea."

"Well, we shall agree to disagree," said Blake superciliously. "Where's Zephyr, exactly?"

"Under here," said a slightly muffled Zephyr. "Can some of you get off the bed? I'm a bit stuck."

"Zephyr... there's nobody on the bed," Cheren pointed out, noticing one of the zebstrika's striped legs sticking out from the bunk bed they had spent the night in.

"What?! Whitney, this is all your fault!" said Zephyr angrily. "If you hadn't said I might as well sleep under the bed-"

"How is it my fault? I never expected you to actually do it!" Whitney protested.

"Like you never expected Durant to go through with N's bet?" Zephyr asked.

Whitney went pale. "I-! How did you overhear me telling Stacey about that?!"

"I have eidetic ears," Zephyr replied smugly. "Plus, I was standing on top of the big wheel."

"Well... that's nothing like... I thought you understood sarcasm!" Whitney snapped, angry and ashamed.

"Hey, let's not get overwrought. Whitney didn't mean any harm," Bianca pointed out. "I mean, if you were smaller or the bed was higher up, it would've been a great idea!"

"Except it wasn't," Zephyr pointed out.

"You're right. It wasn't," said Whitney, in a small voice. "That's my

problem. I never stop and think! Like that time in the Dreamyard, where I... uh, came up with a plan for fighting those P.L.A.S.M.A agents, played to my strengths and Durant's strengths, didn't get out of my depth... actually, what am I talking about? I learnt from that incident all those years ago. Why am I even having this monologue?"

"Well said!" declared Stacey.

"Guess I won't need to bake her another cake," Blake agreed.

Zephyr looked somewhat put off her stride. "Well, um... it's good to see you've overcome some emotional problems and learnt a valuable moral lesson this early in the day, even though I may not necessarily have planned it. Now, can you remove me from under this bed?"

\* \* \*

><p>Elesa's gym was also a modelling studio, hence the many spotlights and the catwalk bisecting the arena. The woman herself was awaiting the Magnificent Many at the entrance, framed by a set of double doors made from blue-tinted glass and birch wood.<p>

"Ah, Cheren, Bianca, Whitney, Blake, Stacey and Durant! I'm positively ec\_static\_ see you all!" Elesa declared warmly. "And Zephyr, too! It's such an electrifying experience to have a pokÃ©mon like you here. Professor Juniper and that bad-tempered chap with the beard and the full body armour are already inside, awaiting our battles with much interest."

"We shall be sure not to make Professor Juniper regret giving us those three pokÃ©mon," Cheren declared, somehow keeping a straight face in spite of Elesa's dreadful, out-of-the-blue puns. "As for Whitney and Stacey..."

"I have complete confidence in my pokÃ©mon," Whitney assured him. "And my strategies."

"They're our speciality," Stacey agreed.

"Excellent! Come on in, then," Elesa declared, ushering the group through the rather magnificent doors. She led them past two security guards, one of whom was a female human and the other of whom was a non-binary pikachu, then into the arena. A spotlight burst into life over Elesa, perfectly framing her medicham-esque figure as she strode confidently over to her end of the battlefield, from where she had to shout a little to make sure she was heard.

"TAKE YOUR PLACES AT THE OTHER END OF THE ARENA, PLEASE!" Elesa commanded. "DON'T BE ALARMED BY ANY OF THE AUDIENCE! THEY CAN BE A LITTLE OVEREXCITED, BUT THEY MEAN WELL!"

There was some nervous laughter from the far end of the arena, where a great many humans and pokÃ©mon had gathered to watch the battle, or possibly just watch Elesa. Blake understood wholeheartedly.

Cheren didn't. "Really, does she think this is some sort of public clothing exhibition? Gym battles should be a private affair, with nobody but the gym leader, the challenger, several pokÃ©mon and a few close friends. Maybe a cheerleading squad, too."

"Since when?" asked Stacey suspiciously.

"I think that's Professor Juniper and your dad at the back there," Blake helpfully informed Bianca, noticing the scientist waving to them and the former Kalosion regional champion telling her to stop waving so hard, else she might sprain her wrist.

"Hi, Daddy! Hi, Professor!" Bianca called, rushing over to them, much to the confusion of the rest of the crowd.

"Don't run! You'll trip over someone's foot, or worse!" Mr Redwood snapped.

"Well, pardon me for being cheerful and friendly..." Bianca muttered, maintaining her present course and speed until she was next to the two Nuvemans.

Professor Juniper gave Mr Redwood a sideways look. "I'm sorry, is it really that important you keep telling people not to do stuff?"

"Now, look! Beginning every question or ultimatum with 'I'm sorry' won't help your cause. It makes you seem unsure of yourself," Mr Redwood retorted angrily.

"Can't we maybe do the gym battles before a full-blown domestic fued starts?" asked Whitney hopefully.

"Why, certainly! Who shall be first?" Cheren enquired.

"I volunteer Blake," said Zephyr, before anyone else could speak, "on condition that he battles Eles'a's zebstrika with me." She addressed Blake. "You are familiar with my attacks and specialities, correct?"

All eyes turned to Zephyr, then to Blake.

"Me, with you as...? I'm not saying I don't want to," said Blake quickly, "but why, exactly?"

"It is because you are the Hero of Truth, and I wish to judge your capabilities for myself," Zephyr explained.

"Oh, really?" said Cheren, with some mild jealousy. He'd known this sort of thing was coming right from day one, when Blake somehow managed to tie with him in their first pok mon battle despite the obvious difference in talent. "Then who, pray, is the Hero of Ideals?"

"They think it's N, but I doubt it," Zephyr replied. "For one thing, it will almost certainly be a Heroine of Ideallssss... WAIT, YOU KNOW THAT LEGEND?!"

"Everybody with the access to a library or, in a small, remote town, the internet, knows of that legend," Cheren replied dismissively. "Well, I'm not bitter. If Blake is for some reason to be the Hero of Truth, fair play to him. Bianca, opinions?"

"Um... what is this Truth and Ideals business even about, anyway?"

Bianca asked.

"Well, it's like this," Professor Juniper informed her, never willing to miss a chance to explain stuff to a bright-eyed, curious child. "Long ago, there were two brothers who-

"OH, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD! WILL YOU PLEASE HURRY UP?!" Elesa roared, the sheer magnitude of her voice knocking some of the audience off their feet.

"Oh, what a voice, what a pair of lungs, what acoustic teeth...! Um, right. Coming, Zephyr?" said Blake shakily.

"Naturally," replied Zephyr.

So saying, the boy and zebstrika strode determinedly over to their place in front of the crowd. Blake did his best to stare coolly into Elesa's eyes as she retrieved her first pok  mon-ball, quietly reflecting that, what with Burgh's attitudes to him, an electric-type pok  mon without a pok  mon-ball wouldn't exactly do wonders for his reputation.

"Emmy, I choose you!" Elesa declared, as her first pok  mon flashed into existence. A small, cute, white rodent with round ears and flaps of skin between its arms and body. An emolga.

Blake knew exactly what pok  mon was needed to take care of an emolga: Georgina. Reaching for her pok  mon-ball, his mind was already going through a myriad of perfectly thought-out plans... well, not really, but he asked me to put that bit in. He did have a couple of strategies, though.

Elesa wasted no time in getting started. "Emmy, use spark!"

With a battle cry of "Molga!", Emmy flung herself at Georgina, giving the boldore an electrified punch in the face. And I'm sure you know how hard it is to pinpoint a boldore's face. Georgina cringed in pain, but gave no ground.

"Since she's so close, point-blank rock blast!" Blake commanted. Georgina's crystals glowed bright red, and she shot out a barrage of small, fast rocks, knocking Emmy for six.

"Perhaps you'd better hang back a little," said Elesa, looking slightly concerned. Emmy gave an enthusiastic nod of agreement, leaping up to glide over to the far side of the arena. "Now show them your inner light. Use electro ball!"

Blake looked somewhat thoughtful. "Electro ball does more damage to slow opponents, and... Georgina, you're a rock. You're a rock! Quick, sand attack!"

Emmy's crackling sphere of electricity hurtled towards Georgina, who barely managed to kick up some sand in time. Thanks to the resistance of earth, however, it dissipated completely.

"Brilliant. Use power gem!" Blake ordered, and Georgina quickly obeyed, firing off a stream of concentrated gem energy which struck Emmy dead-on. The crowd went wild.

"That thunderous applause is driving me barmy..." Elesa muttered.  
"Okay, time to amp up the tension. Agility!"

Shaking off the effects of Georgina's power gem, Emmy zoomed off into the air, flying so fast Georgina could barely see her. For Blake, there wasn't even a "barely".

"Probably best to use iron defence," Blake decided. He felt he ought to be sweating and gritting his teeth and worrying himself sick, but all he could muster right now was a vague sense of helplessness.

"Dore boldore," Georgina agreed.

"Use charge, but keep flying!" Elesa commanded, and momentarily, a streak of lightning above the arena showed where Emmy was.

"Oh, not that..." Blake groaned.

"That!" Elesa grinned, Emmy's power building by the second. "Finish her off with discharge!"

Emmy glowed bright yellow, all her gathered electricity rushing to the surface. Georgina could survive physical attacks like that, but a special one? It was-

In a sudden moment of clarity, Blake realised Georgina had one feature Emmy didn't: the ability to use smack down, the perfect move for dealing with flying enemies. And it would make Emmy vulnerable to ground attacks.

"Use smack down!" Blake cried, and without further ado, Georgina hurled a rock straight at Emmy's head. It broke her concentration, sending the discharge scattering in all directions with little striking Georgina, and Emmy fell to the ground in a dazed heap.

"Oh, no! Emmy, please don't faint!" Elesa cried. "I know you can do it!"

Blake was about to request a finishing mud-slap from Georgina when he noticed the tears welling up around Elesa's big, shiny, soulful eyes. "I can't believe this could happen to you! I'm in shock!"

"Elesa, um, don't be sad," Blake somewhat inexpertly comforted her. "Losing is all part of being a pok  mon trainer. It happens from time to time, and... uh, consider Emmy's perspective. She chose to do this knowing full well that she might get hurt, and I'm sure she wouldn't want you to mope over her." He paused. "I can't believe I'm mentoring a gym leader."

"Well, when things are too good to be true, they're generally negative," said Elesa, grinning wickedly. "Use volt switch!"

"Now, who here can honestly say they weren't expecting that?" Whitney sighed, as Emmy slammed into Georgina, then shot back inside her pok  ball.

"You idiot!" Zephyr snapped, giving Blake a dirty look. "Most gym leaders don't try to charm challengers, true enough, but this one is clearly different."

"You're right. I'm an idiot!" Blake declared.

"That's as may be, but don't get too downhearted," said Elesa breezily, as she released her second pok  mon. "Luke, let's go!"

He was another emolga.

"Another emolga?!" Blake cried.

"Strange. I was expecting a female called Olga, or something," Zephyr commented.

"I'm afraid not. All my pok  mon are named after my favourite video game characters, and none of them are called Olga," Elesa pointed out. "Discharge!"

Georgina was promptly zapped into unconsciousness.

"Return, Georgina. You fought well, but..." \_I wasn't entirely on the ball,\_ Blake's mind finished for him. Well, no point being ashamed of himself just yet; the other pok  mon had come on in leaps and bounds since they started leaping and bounding, and no emolga could keep him down. "Patrick, I choose you!"

"Tchog-watch watchog! WATCHOG!" Patrick roared, bursting into reality with a flash of light as usual. His slanted, unblinking eyes took in Luke's countenance, which didn't look that intimidating.

"You've always been reliable, so let's try to keep things that way," Blake invited the newly-evolved Patrick. "Confuse ray!"

"Counter it with nuzzle!" Elesa commanded, not too worried.

Patrick fired off a ray of very confusing energy, and Luke flew straight into it, nuzzling the ray with all his electric might. He tottered momentarily, but when the confuse ray was finished, he was fine.

"Good heavens! He countered that confuse ray with his nuzzliness energy!" Bianca cried, in case anyone hadn't noticed.

"My pok  mon's thunder will not be insulated easily, young man," Elesa informed Blake. "It will take a spark of genius greater than the average trainer's to resist us!"

"Emomolga!" Luke agreed.

Blake shrugged. "Hypnosis, then."

"What?!" Elesa cried.

"Watchog!" Patrick said triumphantly, blasting Luke with some psychic waves. The emolga slowly tipped over backwards, his eyelids already as heavy as lead weights, and was soon fast asleep.

"...You're not above average, just lucky," said Elesa grumpily.

"True," said Zephyr.

"Oh, shut up," said Blake. "Hyper fang, whenever you're ready! There's no rush."

"Tchog watchog," Patrick acknowledged. He inspected his fingernails, smoothed down his fur a little, swaggered over to Luke and bit down on him with all his might.

"Brilliant! Now use low kick!" Blake ordered, and Patrick kicked the still slumbering Luke high into the air. He thumped down right in front of Elesa, who was looking progressively more furious.

"This is utterly unbelievable!" Elesa declared. "Wake the distortion realm up!"

"Molga emol..." Luke muttered tiredly.

"Bite him once more!" Blake shouted. Watchog gladly obeyed, chomping down right on Luke's wing. The emolga's eyes went wide momentarily, then they turned into swirls, signalling his faintedness.

"All right! One down, another partially tired!" said Blake gleefully.

"Well fought, Luke. You shone like Saint Elmo's fire," said Elesa appreciatively, recalling Luke. "Now what say we take that watchog down a peg? Emmy, the spotlight's on you once more!"

Emmy the emolga burst out of her poké-ball a second time, still tired and battered from her close call with Georgina, but looking fiercer than ever.

"Use lucky chant!" Elesa ordered, before Blake could get a word in edgeways. Emmy began chanting, her usual tomboyish emolgian accent replaced by the voice of an angel, and her flesh glowed bright pink.

"Whatever you're doing, it won't work. Patrick, use hypno... wait, lucky chant keeps pokémon safe from that kind of thing. Um... tackle!" ordered Blake. Patrick lowered his head and charged.

"Spark!" Elesa retorted. Sparks sprung up around Emmy's hand and she biffed Patrick right in the solar plexus (located just above a watchog's tummy), sending him flying.

"Stay strong, Patrick! Try crunch!"

"Thunderpunch, and make it uncrunchable!"

Once more, the two pokémon flew at each other, literally in Emmy's case. Blake grit his teeth and started sweating profusely, just in time. Emmy's hand was blazing with electricity this time, and Patrick's enormous front teeth were as sharp as razors; they collided in midair, both vying for purchase against the other's strength, lightning flashing out in all directions, teeth trying in vain to pierce a galvanised paw... and...

"Well, that was fortuitous. No-one to interfere in my big moment," Zephyr commented, as Emmy and Patrick collapsed to the ground in a

daze.

"That's rather insensitive, but you have a point," Blake acknowledged. "In any case, you did brilliantly, Patrick! Better take a nice rest."

So saying, he thumbed the button on Patrick's poké-ball, sucking the partially victorious watchog back inside.

"Given how badly hurt you were already, that battle was better than I could ever have expected!" Elesa informed Emmy, recalling her. "Now, let's spark up a real battle. Storm the winter palace, as it were. Herschel, I choose you!"

"Herschel? What kind of a name is that?" Cheren muttered.

"I love that series!" Stacey declared, pleasantly surprised. "The puzzles are so much fun."

Herschel, a zebstrika, burst out of his poké-ball with a superior air, nodding amiably at Blake.

"A true gentleman warrior," Zephyr said approvingly, stepping out onto the battlefield. "Blake, remember, you're the Hero of Truth. Critical thinking will be the key to success, and your own weakness is the lock!"

"Er... what?" Blake asked.

"Use flame charge!" Elesa ordered, and Herschel rushed at Zephyr, fire raging around him.

"Thrash!" Blake ordered. He knew electric attacks would have no effect on a zebstrika (hence the flame charge), and Zephyr was surely strong enough to pull off a good thrash.

Zephyr gave a howl of bloodlust and kicked Herschel right in the nose, then set about clobbering him any which way, barely feeling the intense heat as he vied to keep up the flame charge.

"Stay strong, Herschel. Use stomp!" Elesa commanded.

"Evasive flame charge!" Blake ordered, reasoning that Zephyr would need all the speed she could muster.

"I can't stop using thrash until it finishes, remember?" Zephyr pointed out somewhat techily, still lashing out wildly at Herschel as he stomped on whichever of her limbs came his way.

"Oh, right," said Blake. "Well, keep thrashing as hard as you can!"

"Fall back, Herschel," said Elesa concernedly. "Give her a jolt of rock blast!"

"R-rock blast? Did she just say rock blast?!" Blake wailed.

"I've still got control of my limbs! Watch and learn, then do something about the confusing effects of thrash!" Zephyr snapped, as Herschel kicked a barrage of stones right at her. With a cry of



determination, she kicked them all away, then fell to the ground in exhaustion.

"Zephyr? Are you all right?" Blake asked worriedly.

"#Hey, little dodrio, when, when, when will you lay a little egg for my tea...#" Zephyr sang inexpertly, attempting to totter onto her feet again with little success.

\_Oh, nuts, she's confused...\_ This had never happened before. Blake would just have to wing it. "Use whatever you feel like!"

"Sure thing. Here's a thunderblot... tundrabloot... thonderblump... shock thingy!" Zephyr declared, zapping Herschel with some lightning. He shut his eyes in ecstasy, letting the electricity wash over his muscles, giving them a little extra charge.

"But... his motor drive!" Blake protested. That zebstrika's ability was sure to cause trouble.

"I've got lightningrod \_and\_ motor drive," Zephyr pointed out, "but you don't see me complaining, do ya? Oh, no, I'm a stoic, me. I love you, man, you is my best mate..." She fell over once more.

"Ha!" Elesa laughed triumphantly. "You don't seem to be much of a zebstrika trainer, young man. Would a pikachu be more your style, by any chance?"

"I am not-! Ash is-! I know of his existence, but-! Just be quiet!" Blake blustered. "Zephyr, listen closely. Do NOT use extremespeed, and do not go anywhere near Herschel in the process."

"Sure! Leave it to me!" said Zephyr confidently, and she charged Herschel at a significant fraction of the speed of light, knocking him halfway across the arena. The collision must have cleared her head, for she came to a steady halt in front of Herschel's impact crater and blushed like a machop who had just been punched out by a scraggy.

"Oh, Herschel! Don't let it end like this!" Elesa cried.

"I take it you're back to your usual self," Blake commented.

"Indeed," said Zephyr stiffly.

"Then it's time to finish. Use double-edge!" Blake ordered, and Zephyr charged into Herschel with all her might. Both of them were sent reeling by the impact, but Zephyr stood firm and Herschel collapsed in a heap.

"Oh, yeah! That's what we call... truthful heroism?" said Blake unsurely.

Elesa sighed. "Pulling off a victory like that? Burgh really was right. Nevertheless, that battle was truly electrifying, and really tested our talents. In fact, I'll give Zephyr a bolt badge as well!"

"Well, it is my prerogative as a legendary pokÃ©mon," Zephyr smiled.

"Ow!" she added, as Elesa tried to pin the badge to her bare skin.

\* \* \*

><p>"Truthful heroism?" asked Cheren, raising an eyebrow at Blake.  
"Was that really the best you could say?"<p>

"I didn't really have time to think," Blake pointed out.

"I rarely do, but you never see me resort to such unserendipitous phraseology, do you?" said Cheren superciliously.

"It doesn't matter what he said," Professor Juniper pointed out. "You five were inspirational, magnificent, exceedingly talented... I don't suppose any of you feel like coming to Chargestone Cave with me?"

"Whatstone Cave?" Bianca asked, not being especially familiar with Unovan geography.

"Chargestone," Professor Juniper replied. "It's a cave system containing exposed electrically charged rock, which causes the smaller stones in the cave to levitate, as well as providing some of the pokÃ©mon there with nourishment. It's between Driftveil City and Mistralton City, so you'd be heading that way anyway."

"Well, it is my duty as a son of the Clan McTavish to assist the scientific community," Cheren decided. "What are your plans regarding the cave?"

"To study the electrical effects of the rocks," Professor Juniper replied. "They could potentially be an infinite source of energy."

"...I'm sorry, an infinite source of energy?" said Stacey, not believing a word. "That can't happen."

"Well, it has," Professor Juniper pointed out. "Whitney, you'll come, I presume?"

"Certainly! Durant and I used to live there, actually, so we'll be your guides," Whitney offered.

"Then that's settled! When are the five-

"Seven at least," Whitney interrupted, indicating Durant and Zephyr.

"...the seven of you planning on leaving Nimbasa City?" Professor Juniper finished, slightly ticked-off.

"We were planning to visit the fair on route 5," said Whitney. "If there's still time after that, we'd go to Driftveil City."

"Well, then. I trust you like joltiks and galvantulas?" asked Professor Juniper.

Blake turned pale. "You... trust we like them?"

"A Hero of Truth would not do well to be afraid of them, Blake,"

Zephyr pointed out quietly.

"I love galvantulas!" Stacey declared loudly. "83.276% as much as I love Whitney, in fact."

"Brilliant! Last one to Chargestone Cave is a bidoof!" Professor Juniper declared, and she rushed off to Chargestone Cave.

"Yay! Let's go!" agreed Bianca, heading after her at full tilt.

"Bianca, we're not even in Drifeveil yet!" Blake cried, grabbing her by the beret, which came off.

"Oh," said Bianca, screeching to a halt and retrieving her hat. "Should we tell Professor Juniper?"

There was a moment's somewhat bemused silence.

"I think I see a bit of myself in that Juniper lady," said Whitney fondly. "Such a fine, strategic mind, and so tomboyish..."

"That's as may be, but I have no intention of proving myself akin to a bidoof, noble though they surely are. In the name of Nuvema Town, let neither snow nor gale nor quicksand nor aggressive pokémon impede our path. To Route 5, the fair, Driftveil City, the gym, any other distractions along the way, route 6..." he thought for a moment, realising with rising concern just how far it was. "There's no way she could run that far. I'll sojourn for a moment and see if I can find some smelling salts."

He strode off in a great hurry.

"Are you coming, then?" Zephyr enquired of Mr Redwood.

"I'm not really in the mood," he replied. "You will look after Bianca, won't you?"

Zephyr sniffed. "I am inclined to see how well she looks after herself first."

"Oh, of course, 'cause I'm one of those blatantly sexist, self-righteous fatheads who want their daughter to wear frilly pink dresses and never get dirty or have any fun. I know what people think of me, Zephyr," said Mr Redwood, with tranquil rage. "Did I not congratulate Bianca after her victory over Elesa, even though the story completely ignored it in favour of Ravyn's boy? Don't I give her free rein when I know she's in no real danger, or has an indestructible beret? I suggest you think about whether I'm actually a bad father, or just not the kind you would like to be, if you ever had children and... you know... turned into a man."

"Well... that was a nice speech," Zephyr said carefully. "Very... uh, food for thought. Now get lost, you overbearing, misogyntic Kalosian ponce!"

Mr Redwood gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Bianca, be sure to look after yourself."

"Naturally," Bianca assured him.

"Blake, look after Bianca. Whitney, Stacey, look after Blake. Durant, look after Whitney and Stacey. Can you manage that?" Mr Redwood went on.

"Of course!" said Blake, Whitney and Stacey, while Durant merely squeaked.

"Good! If anyone needs me, I'll be in Nuvema Town," said Mr Redwood, and he was off.

"Give Mum my love, will you?!" Blake called after him.

"Don't count on it. She's a terrible example..." Mr Redwood muttered.

\* \* \*

><p>Professor Juniper loved running. Sure, the pokÃ©mon research and general professorial stuff was fun, but running was her life. She couldn't help but laugh with delight as she zipped over Driftveil drawbridge, down the rest of route 5, and into the city; as a brilliant singer once said, she was born to run! Then she crashed into an elderly-ish man in a brown coat and darker brown trousers, with a hairstyle similar to hers. It was none other than Cedric Juniper, her father, and the original Professor Juniper.<p>

"Aaaaugh! Good heavens, woman, what do you think- Aurea?!" Professor Juniper the Elder cried, hauling himself into a vaguely upright position.

"I'm so sorry!" Professor Juniper the Younger wailed. "I wasn't looking, and your outfit kind of blended in with the rest of this city, and... actually, why are you in the middle of a public thoroughfare where anyone moving particularly fast could easily crash into you?"

"I was looking for you, actually," the elder Juniper informed his daughter. "I've come here to tell you that you are in grave danger."

The younger Juniper blinked. "Grave danger? How so?"

"Chargestone Cave," Juniper the Elder replied. "It's crawling with P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation operatives."

"WHAT?! Them, there?!" Professor Juniper II gasped. "Well, I suppose it is a public cave, but... there aren't any pokÃ©mon trainers or anything."

"True, but they want the cave anyway," Professor Juniper I informed her. "It must be something to do with the Light Stone..."

"Light Stone?" Aurea thought for a moment. "But Lenora's got that, and the Dark Stone to boot."

The original Juniper grinned. "They don't know that, though. That fossilised skull they stole threw them completely off the trail!"

## 17. Chapter 17: The Route 5 Debacle

**\*\*~Chapter Seventeen: Servine gets Creamed by a Bouffalant, and the Professors Juniper Raise an Army~\*\***

"All right," said Cheren, in a leaderly (read: bossy) fashion, addressing the Magnificent Many from atop a handy soap box, "I have been in communication with Professor Juniper, and she doesn't need any smelling salts. She has changed her tune a little, though; it seems we need not hurry to Chargestone Cave after all. In fact, we might as well not go there at all."

He paused, letting Whitney, Stacey, Blake, Bianca, Zephyr and Durant's bemusement wash over him.

"I find this highly suspicious," Cheren went on. "However, we can trust that she is in good condition, and should turn our attention to the fair on route 5."

"YAY!" declared Bianca, rushing off.

"Let's go!" Whitney agreed, and she and Blake went after Bianca.

Durant nudged Zephyr on the leg.

"Indeed, let us away!" the zebstrika agreed, and they were off, too.

"Coming, Cheren?" Stacey enquired, heading off to route 5.

"I'm not finished..." said Cheren, in a small voice.

"You are, actually," said a soap merchant, motioning for Cheren to get off the box. He did so, scowling immensely.

\* \* \*

><p>Route 5 was something of a gathering place for all of Nimbasa City's amateur artists, so the fair was as loud and colourful as the actual city. There were dancers, jugglers, musicians, painters, photographers, unicyclists, more dancers, more musicians, lots of singers, and a chap with the most ridiculously over-the-top red hair.<p>

"Holy magikarps! That's Alder!" Cheren gasped, staring in amazement at the bloke with red hair.

"No way! Alder, the regional champion?!" Whitney thought for a moment. "He hasn't been seen for three years."

"Well, he's been seen now," Cheren quite rightly pointed out.

"Do you think we should get his autograph?" Bianca asked.

"I'm not sure... He might just be here to have a good time without being fawned over," Stacey pointed out. "According to my calculations, there is a 57.328% chance that Alder is here simply for

a good time, a 27.389% chance that he specifically intends to be incognito, and-

"Never tell me the percentages!" Cheren snapped. "If this truly is Alder, who has not been sighted for 3 years, I intend to meet him."

"And he'll surely be glad to meet the Hero of Truth," Zephyr pointed out, giving Blake a meaningful look.

"Wha-? Oh, right, yes," said Blake, quickly turning his attention away from Elesa, who was doing some elaborate gymnastics in front of an adoring audience.

The Many made their way through the thronging crowds to Alder, who, it transpired, was dancing inexpertly to the lyrics of a pokémon choir. He was tall and well-built, with tanned skin and a simple brown tunic, and several poké-balls were attached to his necklace.

"Excuse me," said Cheren nervously, tapping Alder on the shoulder, "are you, by any chance-"

"Good heavens, that beret's far out!" Alder declared, staring in amazement at Bianca and completely ignoring Cheren. "Where'd you get it?"

Bianca blushed. "Is it really that good?! Well, from Ulysses McCoy's protective hat shop in Nacrene City, I think."

"Wicked! I've been looking for a beret like that for years, and never found one yet."

Cheren felt slightly out-of-joint. "Um, I'm Cheren McTavish, Nuvema Town's foremost pokémon trainer, and-

"So what brings you young people to Route 5, then?" Alder enquired.

"We're on a pokémon training journey," Blake informed him. "I'm Blake Stormheart, this is Bianca, and the boy trying to get your attention is Cheren. We're researching the pokémon in Unova for Professor Juniper."

"I'm Whitney, a complete hoyden," Whitney introduced herself, "and this is Durant. We're here to chew bubblegum and be brilliant! Neither of us like bubblegum, though, so the brilliance is our main focus."

"I'm Stacey, a bug pokémon expert, and I love bubblegum," Stacey informed Alder.

"Really? You do?!" cried Bianca. "I had you down as a mint imperial fan."

"I am on the hunt for the Hero of Truth," Zephyr informed Alder. "I believe I have found him."

"Excuse me, could I possibly-" Cheren tried in vain to get Alder's attention.

"So you're the Hero of Truth, huh? Well, you're certainly shorter than I was expecting!" Alder declared, giving Blake a pat on the back which almost sent him flying. "Listen, boy, don't try and be too truthful and heroic all the time. I went down that road, and..." a shadow passed over Alder's face, signifying his deep, angsty emotional issues, "...my volcarona died."

"He did?!" Bianca gasped.

"How did he guess it was him?" Cheren muttered.

"Must be 'cause I look so heroically truthful!" replied Blake.

"Volcarona was a she," Alder corrected Bianca. "In any case, her death broke my heart. Since then, I've been avoiding pok  mon battles like the plague."

"WHAT?!" cried Cheren. "That's outrageous! I understand your grief regarding your tragic loss, but the regional champion has certain duties."

"Cheren, I wouldn't..." said Blake warningly.

"Shut it. Alder, three years ago, you completely disappeared from the public eye. If this is just down to one death-

"Oh, I'm sick of you already, you arrogant little twerp!" Alder roared, raising a hand as if to clobber Cheren. Blake, Stacey, Zephyr, Durant and Bianca gasped in horror, wide-eyed with fear and amazement, their terrified faces arranged neatly around Alder and Cheren thanks to some amazing split-screen technology.

"Hey, don't!" Whitney cried, moving between the champion and the terrified boy. "Alder, the death of a pok  mon is a terrible thing to happen, and Cheren should know better than to give you an ear-bashing about it. But you should know better than to hit him!"

"I SHOULD KNOW-?!" Alder's rage was suddenly replaced by a distant melancholy. "That's... that's the exact same thing my sister said to me the night before..." He sighed deeply. "Young man, what's your name?"

"Cheren McTavish, firstborn of the Clan McTavish, guardian of Nuvema Town, heir to... well, it's Cheren."

"I see. Cheren, are you, by any chance, an arrogant, uncaring cretin with too much confidence in his own intelligence and skill, and not enough care for his pok  mon, their feelings, and his own emotional wellbeing?" Alder asked.

"Um-

"I'll take that as a yes," said Alder. "Now, let's head somewhere more private and have a pok  mon battle."

\* \* \*

><p>Professor Cedric Juniper contemplated Heidi, safely concealed

behind a well-placed stalagmite. She was a fine figure of a hydreigon, her mighty central head flanked by two smaller ones, used somewhat like hands during battle. Her dark blue, purple and black scales bore the scars of many fights, yet her eyes were as deep and soulful as an audino's, full of memories and long-hidden emotion. She clearly was not born to be such a warrior.<p>

However, she was dilligent in her efforts to utterly annihilate the klinklang who had taken it upon himself to defend Chargestone Cave: a quick draco meteor up the jacksy sent him clean through the roof, where he sailed on a thermal for several miles before crash-landing next to a sock factory, where he was employed as a security guard.

"Good show there, Heidi," N commented, appearing behind her as if out of nowhere. Cedric could not help but flinch.

"They really are an ungrateful bunch, these cave pokÃ©mon..." Melissa commented, arriving next to her friends.

"We are invading their home, Melissa. They have a right to be upset," N pointed out. "I wish I could make them understand, though. See the bigger picture."

\_Some chance...\_ Cedric reflected. \_PokÃ©mon know an idiot when they see one.\_

"How goes the fighting in the western caverns, then?" N asked.

"Fine," Melissa replied. "I managed to convince the leader of the joltik and galvantula colony to let us look for the Light Stone, but a few guerilla groups are still trying to stop us."

"A few, you say? Enough for us to deal with?"

"Probably. I mean, we only have fifty-odd agents, including five exceptionally powerful pokÃ©mon, three exceptionally powerful humans and one sentient robot, but if we fight with strategy in mind, nothing can stop us! For we are the guardians of truth and justice, the last few who dare to stand up to the pokÃ©mon league! As long as there is fire in our hearts and... stuff, THE P.L.A.S.M.A FOUNDATION WILL NEVER FALL!" Melissa declared.

N blinked. "Uh... good, good."

Well, now. Only fifty agents in the caves? That was probably a bit much for Cedric and Aurea to deal with, but there was little sympathy for the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation in the area. If the two of them could gather a group of like-minded individuals to stop the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, it could prevent a lot of trouble down the line.

\* \* \*

><p>"I don't quite get the logic behind this," Bianca pointed out to Blake, as a confident Alder and a rather overwhelmed Cheren took their places at opposite sides of a well-concealed battlefield. "I mean, if Alder's been avoiding pokÃ©mon battles like the plague... is he a plague doctor?!"<p>



"I don't think so," said Blake. "He's probably trying to teach Cheren a lesson."

"In physics?" Bianca asked.

"A not-being-a-snooty-pants lesson," Blake sighed.

"That should be on the national curriculum," said Zephyr approvingly.

"Now then, Cheren, what pok  mon will you lead with?" asked Alder.

Cheren, doing his best to look confident, retrieved Servine's pok  ball. "Servine, I choose you!"

Servine burst into existence with the usual flash of light, her kind's normally haughty eyes alight with joy at the prospect of a good punch-up. "Servineservine vine serv!"

"Bouffalant, let's go!" Alder declared, releasing a massive, brown pok  mon shaped a bit like a buffalo, complete with massive horns and an enormous afro hairdo. The bouffalant pawed the ground and snorted at Servine.

"What do you think of Bouffalant, then?" Alder asked.

"Um..." Cheren was pretty sure that was a trick question. "He is large, wide, intimidating, muscular... his attacks probably involve charging at the enemy and utilising those enormous horns."

"I see. Cheren, what would it take for you and Servine to defeat me and Bouffalant in battle?"

"Strength, quick thinking, a robust strategy or two, experience, courage..."

"What about the connection between you and Servine?"

"Yes, and that," said Cheren dismissively. Servine gave him a look.

"I see..." said Alder, not overly impressed. "Now, watch and learn."

The errant champion shut his eyes, reaching out with his sixth, seventh and eighth senses for Bouffalant's soul. He soon found it: a warm, powerful glow between dimensions, full of strength and valour. Bouffalant reached back to Alder, sending him a bouffalant's-eye view of the battlefield, including a rather terrified Servine.

"Quick attack," Alder commanded calmly. Bouffalant zoomed towards Servine.

"Evasive vine whip!" Cheren countered. Servine grabbed a nearby tree with her vines and pulled herself out of Bouffalant's path.

Bouffalant screeched to a halt, wheeled around and leapt at Servine. Desperately, she swung herself over the branch out of his way, then

plummeted down to earth when Bouffalant crashed into the tree.

"Oh, good heavens! Servine, are you-"

"Horn attack!" Alder ordered, interrupting Cheren. Bouffalant, unharmed by the tree impact thanks to his soft, fluffy afro, ran at Servine, horns at the ready.

"Counter it with slam!" Cheren ordered. Servine gave him a confident look, and she was right to; slam was more powerful than horn attack, so this would give Bouffalant pause for thought. With all the power she could muster, Servine charged straight at Bouffalant.

Poor Servine was sent flying.

Cheren stared at Servine in horror. She had landed badly, flopping down like a mistreated draught excluder. "How is this possible?! I trained you better than this! All those hours we spent having tournaments with the wild pok  mon... in which I just left you to it and studied battling theory... and never got used to battling with you..." He sighed. "All right, Alder. Your point is proven. Servine, I... I'm deeply sorry."

"Vine serv..." Servine muttered.

"That's the thing, isn't it?" said Alder. "When it comes down to it, these are living creatures fighting for us. Cheren, I suggest you remember that before your volcarona gets killed protecting you from a pack of beartics out for revenge because you badly injured one of them during training."

"Er... right. Alder, sir, I forfeit from this battle," said Cheren, maintaining a calm exterior. "Servine is nowhere near as powerful as Bouffalant, and even if she were, we still have much to learn."

"Good to know," said Alder. "You think we're brilliant, and you've learnt a valuable moral lesson. That's the best a regional champion can hope for! As for the rest of you, you understand too, right?"

"Of course," said Whitney. "If we love and respect pok  mon, and treat them as partners, they'll always be there for us."

"Er... not quite. You've got to always be there for them as well," Alder pointed out. "In any case, Servine, would you say Cheren was a good pok  mon trainer?"

"Vine servine, serv-servine vine," Servine replied. "Servine vinevine... vine-servi?"

Alder smiled faintly. "I see. He lets you play in the mud even though he thinks it's a terrible, disgusting habit, and the two of you do genuinely connect during battles. Jolly good!" He gave Cheren an approving look. "Now, Bouffalant and I will be on our way."

"Bouff bouffalant," Bouffalant agreed, wandering off.

"Nice meeting you!" Bianca called after them.

"Oh, by the way, what is the purpose of a pok  mon battle? Just some food for thought!" Alder called out as he left.

Blake considered that. "The purpose of...? Cheren, since you're such a pillar of moral fibre now, I think you'd better answer that."

"Um..." Cheren looked at Stacey. "This is your area, isn't it?"

"All right. It's for the purpose of challenge and self-improvement," Stacey explained.

"What?! No it isn't!" Whitney protested. "A pok  mon battle is an art form, a means of self-discovery, a canvas on which a pok  mon and trainer can paint a picture unlike anything else! It's the ultimate competition of strength, valour and honour!"

"You're right. It's a blend of such flavours as dreams are made of!" Blake agreed, his eyes shining. "With but a handful of ingredients, such a meal unfolds as would make your heart weep with joy at but the thought of a single taste!"

"Oh, good grief..." sighed Bianca. "Obviously, we just do it for fun!"

Zephyr sighed. "You're all idiots. Battles are a game, a sport and a means of self-expression, no doubt, but they are primarily to be used for fighting evil."

Durant made some squeaky noises.

"He agrees with me!" said Stacey, pleasantly surprised.

"Can we get back to the fair, then?" asked Bianca. "I fancy some chips."

\* \* \*

><p>"I know not who you are, or what your purpose is in removing us from this cave, but know this: as long as you stand against the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, you will be agents of evil," N said calmly, looking defiantly out at the hundred-odd people the Junipers had gathered to protect Chargestone Cave.<p>

"I think you'll find you're the agents of evil," Aurea Juniper informed him, from the head of the motley army. "Your foundation have struck throughout the Unova region, kidnapped countless pok  mon-"

"Kidnapped?!" N looked almost amused. "So when pok  mon trainers come out and force pok  mon into little plastic spheres, take them away from their friends and family, and force them to fight each other, that's all right, but when we rescue them, it's kidnapping?"

"Er..." Aurea considered that for a moment. "Look, most pok  mon get on really well with their trainers, and the capturing is more of a ritual than anything else. A shakedown, if you will. What you lot do is force people who love and respect each other to separate, all in the name of your oh-so-precious ideology. Has it ever occurred to you to go out into the world and meet pok  mon and their trainers, see

what actually goes on?"

N looked at Melissa for some support.

"Shut your face, you miserable old quack!" Melissa suggested to Aurea.

"What? How dare she?!" Aurea cried.

"I concur. How dare you speak to Aurea like that?!" Cedric Juniper demanded.

"It matters not. I've known plenty of pokÃ©mon. When I was young, Ghetsis would take me and Melissa to see homes for abused pokÃ©mon, pokÃ©mon rescued from criminal gangs, pokÃ©mon with a terrible fear of humans... We didn't see that many, but it was enough," N informed them.

"Oh? Did this Ghetsis person take you to see any happy, cared-for pokÃ©mon?!" demanded one of the Junipers' army.

"It would've been a waste of time. Seeing so-called "contented" pokÃ©mon would only confirm what we already knew," N retorted.

"How overzealous can you get?" Aurea muttered. Cedric nodded, rolling his eyes.

"Now, then. Do you still wish to remove us from this cave?" N asked.

"Well, that depends. What are you planning to do here?" asked Cedric.

"Oh, simple! Find the Light Stone so I can awaken Reshiram, team up with him, and create a free, equal society where humans and pokÃ©mon can live together in peace and harmony!" N declared proudly.

"Peace and-?! We already live in peace and harmony, and you're ruining it!" one of the army shouted.

"Unfezant fezzant fezzant unf unfez!" a second person agreed.

"Yeah! How many pokÃ©mon did you have to force out of the cave to get in?!" another warrior of justice demanded.

"Oh, not many," N replied. "True, any disruptive act against pokÃ©mon is a tragedy, but most were willing to either leave peacefully or work around us... after they... saw what we did to..." N leaned in close to Melissa, whispering fiercely, "Melissa, I think we may have made a few serious mistakes."

The assembled P.L.A.S.M.A agents were somewhat taken aback by this, and started muttering amongst themselves.

"N, you can't start doubting yourself now!" said Melissa fiercely. "You'll make the warriors lose confidence!"

"Dreigon hydreii," Heidi agreed, giving N an encouraging look.

"Well, I..." N squared his jaw. "You're right. Ghetsis always said stopping to think wouldn't do us any good."

The P.L.A.S.M.A king reached into his pockets, retrieving a sharp, deadly-looking sword and a long, accurate-looking laser gun. "I will bandy no more words with you filth. You have one last chance to leave us in peace."

"NEVER!" the army of Juniper chorused.

"Goodbye, then," one of them mumbled, scuttling off into the trees.

"So be it," N said solemnly. "P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, once more unto the breach!"

"PLASMAAAAAA!" the group shouted.

"Here we go..." Cedric sighed, as the two armies charged towards each other.

\* \* \*

><p>It was a fine summer morning in Driftveil City. Warm light drifted down to earth, pooling between the grass, flowers and trees, and warming up the roads between houses. The cold-storage warehouses south of the city, protected by infra-red reflectors, were as chilly as ever, and in a large, cosy room in the pok  mon centre, a certain pompous boy was more excited than he had been for years.<p>

"Wake up! WAKE UP!" Cheren hollered. "Come on, come on! Up, up up! All hands on deck! This is not a drill, I repeat, not a drill! WAKE THE DISTORTION REALM UP!"

Blake groaned, forcing his eyelids to part. "Cheren , it's five in the morning..."

"What could possibly be so important now?!" Whitney demanded.

"Star Trek's on!" Cheren declared. "They're showing five episodes in a row!"

Blake and Bianca passed out. Whitney and Stacey sat bolt upright, excited beyond belief.

"Seriously?! This early?!" Stacey cried. "Well, can't look a gift rapidash in the mouth. What series is it?"

"It's the series with the space station," Cheren replied.

"Wicked!" Stacey reached for her pok  -balls. "Come on out, guys! I estimate a 95.735% chance you won't want to miss this!"

\* \* \*

><p>A couple of hours of televised space adventures later, the rest of the Magnificent Many were reluctantly awake.<p>

"This room simply wasn't built for such large audiences," Zephyr commented, stepping carefully over Servine's tail as she surveyed the

Many. "I mean, how can you even see?!"

"Shut up. This is an exciting bit," Whitney informed her, focusing on the small television in a corner of the room, opposite the longest bunk bed.

"Well, pardon me for living..." said Zephyr tetchily.

"I suppose we're the only people in a position to plan the day, then," Blake commented, carefully plaiting Bianca's hair. "Shall we go straight to the gym, or do other stuff first?"

"Cheren would probably want to- don't pull! He'd probably want to focus on Professor Juniper's mission first, and I think we can afford to spend a few days checking out the pokémon around here. Maybe even visit the professor in Chargestone Cave," Bianca suggested. "And we'll see the market as well, won't we? They have bananas all the way from Africa!"

Blake rolled his eyes. "Nobody calls them bananas any more, Bianca. They're nanaba berries." He had finished Bianca's hair, and so set about putting his shoes on. "Zephyr, care to weigh in?"

"I would recommend that you keep abreast of your Aura powers," Zephyr suggested. "You should be able to do more than copy Samantha's attacks, and a Hero of Truth needs all the power they can muster."

"Er... Zephyr, this chosen one thing... I'd like to know more about it," said Blake.

"Fair enough. We'll see if there's an Aura expert in this city," Zephyr proposed. "In the meantime, we need to get Durant out from under the bed. Hey, Whitney, divert your attention to stuff that matters!"

## 18. Chapter 18: The Trouble with Solosis

**\*\*~Author's Note~\*\***

Before we get on with the story, I'd just like to point out that, as of now, this story has more than a thousand reads, and hardly any reviews. I am always looking to improve, so, if you have anything to say about this story, please say it. I am not normally one to ask specifically for feedback, but there's only so much being ignored that a chap can take, and I'm sure many of you have stuff you want to say which, for some reason, you feel the need to keep to yourselves. I shan't bite, I hasten to assure you.

In any case, I hope you enjoy this chapter:

**\*\*~Chapter Eighteen: Whatever Happened to Cedric and Aurea? Also, Lore and Destiny and Stuff, and Maybe a Few Solosis~\*\***

"Slight problem: there are no Aura experts residing here in Driftveil City, and the nearest one is miles away," said Zephyr grimly, approaching the Magnificent Many from opposite the really long park bench they were occupying. "However, Blake, I shall be glad to tell you all I know about the legend surrounding you."

"Really?!" cried Bianca. "I love ancient lore! It's so lorey and ancient!"

Blake wasn't so enthused; this Hero of Truth business had been so out of the blue that he wasn't sure of anything, and some overblown spiel about destiny and ancient powers and truth and ideals wouldn't exactly do wonders for his mood.

"That's all very well, but we must be getting along to the cold storage," Cheren pointed out. "I'm sure the workers there won't mind if we examine the resident pokémon."

"But will the pokémon mind?" Whitney pointed out.

"Good point... besides, the cold disagrees with me," Stacey agreed.

"Then why don't the two of you go and visit a strategist convention or something?" said Cheren sniffily.

"No need for that kind of attitude..." said Whitney, a little hurt. "All the same, this research business is mostly your quest. Stacey, do you think they have strategist conventions here?"

"Could do," Stacey agreed. "I estimate a 96.285% probability that there are other strategists in the city, and a 73.827% chance that there is some sort of facility for battle strategists, or expert pokémon trainers of any kind."

"Then let's go and find out. Have fun at the cold storage, you fellows!" Whitney declared, and she, Stacey and Durant were off, arm in arm in antenna.

"Bon voyage! Best wishes!" Bianca called after them, waving her handkerchief. A single tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm so happy for the three of them..."

"We're still all part of this group," Blake pointed out. "Just a little split right now."

"But I doubt anything can split the three children of Nuvema Town. It is as it should be: all the best things in life come in threes," said Zephyr sagely, getting into the spirit. "Come, young Stormheart, Redwood and McTavish: we shall talk as we make our way to cold storage, and, er, well..." She had run out of words. "I'll tell you stuff. About other stuff. Oh, let's just go!"

\* \* \*

><p>Outside Chargestone Cave, there had been a bit of an affray.<p>

"Aurea, Cedric, assorted defenders of Chargestone Cave, you disgust me. Your willingness to bring about a war just so you can keep stuffing innocent creatures into plastic balls and forcing them to fight each other is... unforgivable," N declared, addressing the hundred people bound and gagged in front of him. Somehow, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation had pulled it off. "However, since we can't find the Light Stone here anyway, I suppose you can go free."

He clapped his hands, signalling for a few P.L.A.S.M.A operatives to start untying people, confiscating pokémons from the humans and stomping on them. (The pokémon inside the balls were none too pleased about being stepped on, but the end apparently justified those means.)

"Shouldn't we execute them or something?" Melissa commented.

"Not really. We don't actually own Chargestone Cave, and killing people might tip the authorities over the edge. Right now, we're outlaws, and I'd rather not be classified as a terrorist just yet," N reasoned.

"Fair enough. Where are we going next, then?"

"Driftveil City's cold storage," N replied.

Professor Juniper (the second) was so shocked she bit clean through her gag. "C-cold storage?! Blake, Cheren, Bianca, Samantha, Servine, Templeton and all their friends are in that city!"

N turned his steely gaze upon her. "So?"

"Er... so you don't stand a chance!" Aurea declared.

Melissa laughed. "Don't we, by jingo?! I'll show them what cold steel feels like!"

"Although now that you mention it, that girl with the wellies and the Aura boy have me worried," N pointed out. "They could be trouble further down the line."

"Well, we did spend our formative years fending off Team Rocket," Melissa pointed out. "If anyone's prepared for trouble, it's the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation!"

\_Hold on, Blake, Cheren, Bianca, Whitney and that other girl with the orange hair,\_ Aurea silently hoped. \_Or possibly just lock the P.L.A.S.M.A people in once they get to cold storage. That'd really put a spanner in the works.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"I should perhaps start at the beginning," Zephyr declared sensibly, as the Magnificent Many (sans Whitney, Stacey and Durant) made their way to the cold storage warehouses. They were half an hour's walk south of Driftveil City, and a few mountains gave the walk a majestic backdrop. "About seven thousand years ago, in the formative years of pokémon training, two brothers were charged with protecting Unova from humans who used the power of pokémon for evil, pokémon who used the power of humans for evil, and evil in general. They were known as the Hero of Truth and the Hero of Ideals."<p>

"Why not two sisters or something?" asked Bianca suspiciously. She had taken to feminism like a slugma to a pyroclastic flow.

"Because, due to a genetic mix-up, both were born male," Zephyr replied. "They did have a sister, but she doesn't appear until later."



Anyway, the brothers' names were Black and White, and, due to another genetic mix-up, they were both black. White was a little paler, though. Both brothers were talented in the arts of war, and fought beside the incredibly awesome legendary dragon pokémon Zekrom and Reshiram. Both brothers were also Aura masters."

"I see where this is going..." said Blake, considering the idealistic and heroic Whitney.

"As do I," said Cheren. "Is Blake a descendent of these brothers, then?"

"Probably not. Being the Hero of Truth isn't hereditary. Now, while White and Black were the protectors of Unova, a terrible drought struck the land. When it became clear that the food was running out, and no crops would be able to grow for some time, Black decided to petition Landorus, Tornadus and Thundurus to give Unova some rain. White, on the other hand, disagreed."

Bianca raised a hand. "Whatorus, whatadus and thundewhat?"

"Landorus, Tornadus and Thundurus," Cheren informed her. "Just your usual common-or-garden spirits of nature."

"Quite. As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, White disagreed. He believed in self-sufficiency, and that people should be able to sort out their problems without complaining to the legendary pokémon all the time," Zephyr explained.

"So he'd be the Hero of Ideals, then," said Blake.

"Oh, will you just shut up and listen?!" Zephyr snapped. She cleared her throat, then launched back into her spiel, hoping that speed would stave off future interruptions. "White was adamant that teamwork and critical thinking could solve anything, and so refused to even consider talking to the legends. Black, however, was acutely aware that people were beginning to starve, and that by the time someone came up with a solution, it would be too late for many. So the two brothers fought, and Zekrom and Reshiram joined them. Reshiram fought beside White, whereas Zekrom lent her power to Black, resulting in one of the longest and most violent battles in history. Neither side could gain an advantage, though, and neither would agree with the other. Should the Unovans come up with their own solution to the famine, or did they need some help from elsewhere? It was the aforementioned sister who came up with the solution, actually. As a neutral third party and long-time companion to both brothers, she was well equipped to work out a solution that would satisfy both of them: hand out rain-dancing kits and teach people how to purify sea water."

"Yay! I'm so glad it all worked out for the best!" Bianca declared.

"Aaaaargh!" Zephyr howled. "I can't take this any more! Cheren, how can you cope with the constant interruptions?! I'm cracking up!"

"It takes practice," said Cheren levelly. "And absolutely no concern whatsoever for what anyone else thinks."

"Well, that may work for you," said Zephyr shakily.

"Zephyr, it's all right," Blake reassured her.

"No it bloody well isn't!" Zephyr declared. "Can't an Avatar of Zekrom get through one speech about ancient legends without three stupid children chiming in?!"

Blake, Bianca and Cheren gasped in unison, then stared at Zephyr for a few seconds to hammer the point home.

"...What?" asked Zephyr.

"Avatar of Zekrom?" Blake repeated. "Meaning... you're Zekrom?!"

"Oh, wow! A primarily black, amazingly powerful electric-type pok mon whose name sounds a bit like Zekrom, and she's actually Zekrom?! I'd never have guessed!" cried Bianca.

Zephyr suddenly felt like the eyes of the entire world were on her. "Well... in a way I am," she said carefully, "and, in a way, I am not. I am, and always will be, Zephyr, just as Zekrom is, and always will be, Zekrom. I am also she, and she is also me, but we are each primarily ourself. Is that clear?"

"No!" said Blake and Bianca.

"Crystal clear," said Cheren smugly. "A part of Zekrom is in you, but you are not truly Zekrom just yet."

"That's right!" said Zephyr, with a smile. "In order to transform into the true Zekrom, I will need the Dark Stone, and Blake will need a bit more talent in the Aura department."

"Great!" Blake said sarcastically.

"To that purpose, when your pok mon practice their battle techniques, I would like you to practice whatever Aura-related talents you have," Zephyr suggested. "And try to develop some new ones."

"Oh, Blake! I'm so happy for you!" Bianca declared, hugging him. "So young, and already destined to be a Knight of Aura. Have you told your mum, by the way?"

"I have. She completely agreed with you and didn't even ask how I felt about the whole thing," Blake replied.

Cheren, watching in silence, gave a wan smile. Ravyn certainly knew how to set her son an example.

"Well, she didn't need to ask, did she?" Bianca pointed out. "You couldn't possibly be anything other than amazingly happy and excited and determined to do your best and be a really amazing Aura master and everything!"

Blake sighed. "There is an excited part of me, but he's... I don't really know how to feel any more."

Zephyr and Cheren looked at each other meaningfully.

"Blake, sorry in advance," said Bianca sympathetically.

Blake blinked. "Er... what?"

Zephyr kicked him in the head.

"What are you playing at?!" Blake demanded, nursing his injured head.  
"That's no way to-"

Cheren lamped him one with his staff.

Blake grit his teeth. "Oh, now this is just-"

Bianca kissed him right on the lips, doing her best to look like  
Elesa.

Blake passed out.

\* \* \*

><p>When Blake awoke, he was cold, in spite of being covered by a heavy blanket. His eyes didn't seem too reluctant to open, so he opened them, revealing a metallic ceiling covered in frost. He slowly rotated his head, bringing the dull ache around Zephyr's hoofprint to the forefront of his mind, and found himself face-to-face with a crate of ice-cream.<p>

\_I'm in the cold storage place,\_ Blake realised. \_But how did... wait, Zephyr did this. And Cheren. And Bianca was in on it!\_ This was the last thing he'd been expecting. Betrayed by childhood friends, then dumped in a freezing-cold warehouse?! At least he had a blanket. And come to think of it, a pillow, and no shackles or anything.

Coming to the conclusion that whatever was going on went far deeper than he could ever have suspected, whatever that was supposed to mean, Blake slowly and carefully drew himself into a sitting position. His hat was gone; not too bad, seeing as how people loved to make fun of him looking like Ash, and-

Someone was speaking.

"I'm not entirely one hundred percent clear on what we were trying to accomplish there," said the friendly, confused voice of Bianca, coming from the other side of the ice-cream crate. "I mean... what happened, exactly?"

An exasperated sigh, almost certainly Cheren's. "I've told you this more times than I care to remember, Bianca. Blake suffered a mild psychological upset during the affair in Castelia City, where he discovered he was to be the Hero of Truth. This left him unable to be enthusiastic about stuff. Zephyr had the idea of confiscating his hat, in case it reminded him of Burgh's constant teasing."

"Oh, I see," Bianca lied. "All for the best, right?"

"Wrong!" Blake roared, having deduced that he wasn't in any real danger, then lost his temper with Cheren, Zephyr and Bianca. He

shoved the ice-cream crate out of the way in a towering fury, revealing his three acquaintances, who were looking startled and embarrassed. "You think you can just beat someone up to get them to think the way you want, do you?! Zephyr, shame on you! Me, Samantha and all the other pok  mon I've caught are going to be the most truthful heroes who ever lived, and then you'll have to eat your words and- I'm playing right into your hand, aren't I?"

Bianca burst into tears. "Oh, Blake, I'm so sorry! I didn't want to have to beat you up and alter your mental state but they talked me into it and I'm really really sorry and I'll never do it again and did you like kissing me? Only I've never kissed a boy, and..." She realised Blake wasn't nearly as charmed by this as could be hoped. "We had to do it, Blake! For the future of..." She looked curiously at Zephyr. "Why did we have to do it?"

"It was essential," Zephyr replied. "If Blake chooses to abandon his destiny as the Hero of Truth, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation may well conquer Unova."

Blake glared at her, murderously. "And just why was the kick in the head essential?"

"Ask Stacey. She's the psychologist," Zephyr replied.

"I see. Cheren, what do you have to say about this?" Blake asked, the tone of his voice implying that he had better have a lot to say.

Cheren shrugged. "You're perfectly welcome to perform a complicated practical joke on me to get your own back. In the meantime, we have pok  mon to study. Blake, Bianca, come. Zephyr, do what you usually do."

"Wha-!? Oh, now hang on! Wait!" Blake cried. Cheren ignored him, dragging Bianca off.

"Think about it, won't you?" Zephyr suggested to Blake.

"Oh, I won't, all right," Blake said coldly. "This whole thing was foisted on me right when I didn't need it, and... actually, if it's my own choice, and I'm in my own mind without any confidence problems, why not?"

Zephyr's eyes widened. "Really?!"

"Sure! I mean, there's nothing bad that could happen, right?" said Blake breezily.

Zephyr said nothing.

\* \* \*

><p>"Driftveil City pok  mon centre, come in, please!" Professor Juniper the Younger shouted urgently into her cross-transciever. "This is Professor Juniper calling Driftveil City pok  mon centre! Acknowledge!"<p>

"I acknowledged you five minutes ago!" the rather overwrought Nurse Joy protested. "You've been shouting so loudly I couldn't get through

to you."

Aurea fainted, her weird hairstyle thankfully cushioning her impact with the bare, rocky ground around Chargestone Cave.

"...Hello? Professor, is something wrong?" the Joy asked worriedly.

"This is Professor Juniper the Elder speaking. She's fine, albeit unconscious," Cedric declared, picking up the cross-transciever and silently wishing he'd brought Aurea up differently. "We're outside Chargestone Cave, and there's a bit of a problem. The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation came and stepped on lots of pokÃ©-balls, so the pokÃ©mon inside aren't able to materialise."

The Joy gasped in horror. "How could they?! I could wax eloquent about their lack of foresight for hours, but suffice it to say I'll be there before you can say Jack Robinson. Audino, mind the fort!"

Cedric raised an eyebrow. "Jack Robins-"

"Hiya!" Nurse Joy declared, screeching to a halt outside the cave and attracting quite a few stares, including from Cedric. "Now, where are these un-materialised pokÃ©mon?"

"Over there," said one of the unsuccessful Chargestone Cave defence force, gesturing to a group of small, transparent pokÃ©mon huddled together in misery, with a lot of concerned humans and corporeal pokÃ©mon watching over them.

"Oh, my. That's a lot..." Joy commented. "I'll need to do a spot of triage." She cupped a hand over her mouth. "Anyone here know about rematerialising pokÃ©mon?!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Cheren's log, Tuesday the twelfth of June: Blake has taken it surprisingly well. I can't say I was especially thrilled to have to clobber such a beloved childhood friend as he, but-"<p>

"I'm a beloved childhood friend now, am I?" Blake smirked, materialising behind Cheren as he had seen N do.

Cheren jumped. "Er... yes. Of course! I mean, I'm the new and improved Cheren, as kickstarted by Alder, and... is that really a problem?"

"Of course not! It's just about time you admitted it," said Blake. "In any case, I've written a pokÃ©dex entry on vanillishes, and Bianca did one for vanillites. As for vanilluxes, we might need to look elsewhere."

"I know," said Cheren. "As I was saying, Cheren's log, Tuesday the twelfth of June: I, Blake and Bianca have completed a few pokÃ©dex entries, and I have spell-checked Bianca's thoroughly. Really, does the girl not know how many "a"s there are in "banana"? And how are bananas even related to vanillites?! It beggars belief. My pokÃ©mon team now includes a cinccino, who decided he wanted to see the world after overhearing me and Bianca discussing pokÃ©mon diversity."

"You did?! Cheren... how long was I out for, exactly?" Blake asked worriedly.

"Four hours," Cheren replied. "It took a lot of preparation for Samantha to mind-meld with you."

"Mind meld?! She was in on this?!" Blake cried.

"Actually, she was so furious with Zephyr for coming up with this plan that she mega evolved, becoming the first dewott to do so," Cheren replied. "Once we calmed her down, though, she grudgingly decided to go along with our idea."

Blake's head was spinning once more. "Was... did you plan this beforehand, then?"

"It was last night, actually, while you were busy fitting Durant under the bed," Cheren replied. "The kiss from Bianca was Zephyr's idea, by the way. She thought it might assist your mental state."

"You're nuts..." Blake sighed. "Still, once I get the Dark Stone, you're going down! Er, or not. Are you sure Zephyr didn't do a little more to me than she's letting on?"

After a spot of afternoon tea, during which Bianca explained how bananas relate to vanillites, the three Nuvemans and one zebstrika of unknown origin were on their way back to Driftveil City.

"Do you know where the Dark Stone is, then?" Blake asked, after a few minutes of walking.

"The Dark Stone? Well... not really. I have an inkling, but locating it may be somewhat complicated," Zephyr informed him.

"I like bananas," Bianca piped up. "Incidentally, mightn't there be, ooh, I don't know, a thousand grey stones with different shades?"

"A thousand? Two is plenty," Zephyr scoffed.

Bianca pouted at her. "Just a thought..."

\* \* \*

><p>And thus, the four continued on their way to Driftveil City at a gentle pace, enjoying the warm sun, the lack of P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, and each other's company. Then a wild solosis appeared.<p>

"Oh, golly! What's a solosis doing here?!" Bianca asked, amazed by the small, round pok mon surrounded by green cytoplasm. "They're only found on route twelve."

Cheren fell flat on his face, too stunned to keep walking. "R-route twelve?! Solosis are found on routes five and sixteen, not twelve!"

"Oh," said Bianca. "Well, this isn't route five or sixteen, so..."

"It might be a migrant solosis," Blake pointed out, helping Cheren to his feet. "Is your nose all right? Only it looks a little flattened..."

"It will surely be fine," Cheren assured Blake. "In any case, we'd best-" His eyes darted over to a bush. "There are two more in there."

"Really? Must be a family outing," Blake suggested.

"Or a small, round pokémon convention," Bianca proposed. "Do you suppose pokémon have conventions, by the way? They'd have a lot to bond over. There could be fire conventions, quadruped conventions, banana conventions..."

Zephyr gave one of the solosis a heavy look. "See what you've done?" She returned her attention to the Magnificent Many, ignoring Bianca's rambling. "If you can be persuaded to tear your eyes away from these random solosis, we really must be getting along."

"What's the hurry?" asked Bianca.

"Not telling. Let's go!" Zephyr replied, and she was off, closely followed by a sonic boom that sent Blake, Bianca and Cheren flying.

"She's really quick on her feet, isn't she?" Blake commented.

"True enough," Cheren agreed. "Good heavens. More solosis!"

"Really?!" cried Blake and Bianca, looking over in amazement to see a group of no less than twelve solosis, telling stories around a psychic campfire. As they looked, one of the solosis split into two.

Bianca could take no more excitement. "Solosis mitosis?! Oh, golly!"

"Shouldn't we be recording this?" Blake asked, retrieving his pokédex. "Look sharp, you fine solosis!"

Blake could see the line between one solosis's two internal hemispheres getting more pronounced, so he aimed his pokédex's video camera at him. The solosis's nucleus slowly pulled apart into two nuclei, complete with two eyes and one mouth apiece, and after greeting each other warmly, the two new solosis set about dividing their cytoplasm.

"Oh, wow! What a sight!" Bianca breathed. "If only Aardvark123 could do more than just describe this... then again, I hear he's trying to get good at art, too."

Cheren gave her a funny look. "Who's Aardvark123?"

"Er... no-one," Bianca replied. "Do you suppose we'll see any more solosis today?"

"Probably not," said Cheren. "Then again..."

Even as he said it, a veritable horde of solosis floated over to the twelve solosis campers, leading to much animated discussion.

"There's something peculiar going on here, isn't there?" Blake commented, attempting to replace the poké-dex in his pocket only to discover a small solosis in there. "Out you come, little fella."

"Indeed. If I were to guess, I would say this was some sort of mass outbreak, perhaps due to climate change," said Cheren.

"Climate change? We haven't had any of that since... what was it...? Four thousand years ago?" said Blake, struggling to remember. (There was no school in Nuvema Town, and, Japanese law being as it was, he hadn't had much cause to attend the school in Striaton City.)

"It could have started again. In any case-"

A black-and-white striped blur, thunder arcing off her mane, skidded to a halt in front of Cheren, making him jump.

"Zephyr!" Bianca cried.

"'Tis me," the Avatar of Zekrom confirmed. "There's something peculiar going on in Driftveil City."

"A mass solosis outbreak?" asked Blake.

"Why, yes! How did you-?" Zephyr suddenly realised that she and the children were all but surrounded by the single-celled psychic pokémon. "Oh. Yes, that's what's happening, and Nurse Joy doesn't seem to be here. Professor Juniper and her dad aren't answering the phone either, so skilled pokémon trainers like you are what we need. We must hurry!"

She was off again, kicking up some dust into Bianca's face in the process.

"Ohhh..." Bianca groaned, dusting herself off.

"You heard Zephyr. Much as I don't admire her violence, we'd better hurry back to the city," Blake proposed. Nothing about the solosis outbreak made any sense to him, but it would probably work out in the end. "Follow me!"

Blake sprinted off to Driftveil City, and was promptly overtaken by Cheren.

"Let's get one thing straight, Blake! I am still the one people follow!" the moderately haughty boy declared, panting heavily, as he ran past Blake.

\* \* \*

><p>"It's you three! I'm so glad you're here. Something really peculiar's going on," Whitney said urgently, running over to the three Nuvemans as soon as they got to the city. Stacey and Durant were with her, of course. "The city's full of solosis!"<p>



"We know," Blake informed her. They were everywhere: solosis on the rooves, solosis in market stalls, solosis sitting on cars, solosis floating along the streets, solosis wedged in chimney tops, solosis sitting on people's heads, solosis in the trees, and solosis dividing everywhere.

"Their binary fission seems to be out of control," Stacey commented.

"That'd explain it. What could be causing it, though?" Blake asked.

"A duosion or reuniclus emitting a "divide lots" signal," said a random passer-by who looked like they knew what they were talking about.

"The evolved forms of Solosis..." said Cheren, scratching his chin contemplatively. "Something very peculiar must be going on."

"We know, Cheren!" everyone present snapped.

Cheren paled. "Er... well, it can't hurt to remind ourselves."

"Peculiar or not, these solosis represent a severe threat to the balance of nature," said Blake grimly, removing another solosis from his pocket. "I won't let this continue!"

"That's the spirit!" said Zephyr proudly.

"Actually, I think there might be something about it in here..." Bianca commented, retrieving one of the pokémon books from her bag. "Let's see now... servines, sigilyphs, solar beams, soldering irons... aha! Solosis!"

Blake turned dramatically to face one of the mountains near Driftveil City, on which was perched a small tower. "The solosis-splitting signal must be coming from up there. Those devils won't get away with this!"

Whitney stared at him. "What devils?"

"He's really lost it..." Cheren sighed.

"Onwards, to the mountain! In the name of the truth!" Blake finished. He was just about to rush off to the mountain when Bianca lay a hand on his shoulder.

"This happens every year, actually," Bianca said apologetically. "It's the solosis mating season."

Blake stopped short. He blinked a few times, looked at Bianca, then at Cheren, then at Durant, and finally at Zephyr, where his gaze lingered. "All right, you so-called Avatar of Zekrom. Just what did you do to my head?!"

\* \* \*

><p>The tiny, miserable-looking, barely corporeal darmanitan breathed

a sigh of relief as he was sucked into Nurse Joy's poké-mon resizing device, then released at full size, breathing fire into the sky so everyone knew he was back to normal.<p>

"You're as good as new!" Joy informed him.

"Nitan darma!" the darmanitan rejoiced.

"So then," said Joy, addressing the now conscious Professor Juniper, "what happened here, exactly?"

"Well, my father and I had raised an army to protect Chargestone Cave from the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation-" Aurea began.

"As you do," Cedric interjected.

"...And it didn't work out too well," Aurea continued. "We ended up bound and gagged, and as he said, the P.L.A.S.M.A people made a point of crushing all the poké-balls underfoot, even if there were poké-mon still in them."

"I see... Do they honestly not know what happens when a poké-ball gets destroyed?" Joy contemplated, none too impressed.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Cedric commented. "They're utter plonkers, from what I've seen. There's nothing wrong with the way people treat poké-mon!"

"Father, poké-mon \_are\_ people," Aurea tactfully reminded him.

Cedric's mind hit a metaphorical wall. "Uh... I... you know what I mean."

"It would be very easy for humans to just not care, though, wouldn't it? What with advanced technology, poké-balls which never fail to capture a poké-mon, genetic engineering..." Aurea contemplated. "Thinking poké-mon aren't people is the thin end of the wedge."

"I know, I know!" said Cedric tetchily. "If you want to join the bloody P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, just say so."

Aurea looked hurt. "I'd never join them! All I'm saying is that, rather than being a black-and-white issue, the correct answer's somewhere between our ideologies." She thought for a moment. "Well, it's probably closer to ours, but still..."

## 19. Chapter 19: Clay Bullies Everyone

**\*\*~Author's Note~\*\***

Clay is not meant to be a caricature of Americans, and I mean no offence to any American readers of this story. I'm simply taking his characterisation to its logical(ish) conclusion.

Now that that's clear, on with the story:

**\*\*~Chapter Nineteen: Clay Bullies Everyone, and the Magnificent Many get Serious~\*\***

"Bianca's log, stardate whatever: We're gonna challenge Clay and he's a really amazing ground-type gym leader who also runs Unova's bestest aluminium mine! Templeton and Floella are really excited and Perdita and George have mixed feelings, but Claribelle's feeling a little under the weather, so she'll be sitting the battle out. Speaking of the weather, it's getting warmer, so Whitney's given up on wearing wellies. Her name sounds a bit like "wellies", by the way. I think there's a conspiracy going on..."

"It's Tuesday the nineteenth of June," said Cheren heavily. "Not stardate whatever."

"Oh," said Bianca, feeling rather silly.

"Shall we be off, then?" asked Whitney, resplendant in a pair of black combat boots with pink laces and soles (which somehow kept her feet cool).

"We shall," said Cheren.

"Then let's go!" Blake declared, eloquently summing up the whole conversation. Deep down inside, he was confident Samantha, having spent most of the past week honing her skills, would cream whatever ground-types Clay sent her way, unless he believed in them too much or they were amazingly lucky. Even if she somehow lost, Lilly, Patrick, Darkblade, Darren and Georgina were on top form, and there was nothing like having a Knight of Aura as your trainer for encouragement.

\* \* \*

><p>Driftveil City's gym wasn't too hard to find, given its stature, so the Magnificent Many had little trouble moseying on down. The gym was a colossal edifice of stone and metal, as strong as a bastiodon and twice as intimidating. The door was made from pure iron, dark and smooth, inset with elegant carvings of a man beating people up with a pickaxe. He had a cowboy hat and flared trousers, and looked like a real bully.<p>

"I don't see why all these carvings look so angry..." Bianca said nervously.

"Well, it could be a psychological thing," Whitney proposed. "You know, to test whether challengers are brave enough to battle Clay, or maybe scare salespeople away."

Cheren raised his walking stick and tapped on the door. It bonged expansively.

"Brilliant acoustics!" said Zephyr appreciatively.

"Indeed," said Cheren. "Clay! Open the door!" He gave the door a few more clouts. Nothing happened.

"Perhaps someone should try the handle," Bianca suggested, gesturing to an ornate wooden handle on the far side of the door.

"Never overlook the obvious," said Blake approvingly, noting the look of incredulity on Cheren's face. "Let's see now..." He grasped the

handle firmly and pulled. Nothing happened. Blake pulled harder. The door remained stationary. Taking a few deep, calming breaths, Blake let his qi flow into his hands (as detailed in an Aura pamphlet), planted his feet firmly apart, and heaved on the door.

Whitney, Stacey, Zephyr, Bianca and Durant looked on in resignation as the handle came off in Blake's hands, sending he and it flying.

"Hinges must've rusted," mumbled Blake, dusting himself off sheepishly.

Whitney sighed. "Alternatively, you've just made the oldest mistake in the book." She stepped purposefully over to the door and gave it a push.

Nothing happened.

"Come on, come on..." Whitney muttered, shoving on the door with all her might. "I must be going soft. Open, you stupid door!"

She kicked it, with no effect. Then she punched it, screamed in pain, ate an orange berry to heal her knuckles and gave the door a murderous look. Whitney charged the door, thumping into it with a resounding bong.

"Clay, you miserable reptile! You've raised the wrath of the Blazehearts, now you'll reap the fire blast!" Whitney roared, kicking the door again. It was less painful than punching it, but considerably less effective.

"Whitney, it isn't worth it," said Stacey, a note of concern in her voice. "I estimate a 68.332% chance that, if you continue assailing this door, you'll severely injure yourself."

"Your concern for my safety is appreciated, but pointless," said Whitney. She raised her hand, palm facing the door.

"She's lost it..." Cheren muttered.

Stacey gasped, face lighting up with awe. "She ain't lost a thing. Look!"

A roaring column of flame issued from Whitney's hand, striking the door head-on. Though she sweated both from effort and temperature, Whitney forced herself to stand firm. Only after a few minutes' flamethrowing did she lower her hand, to reveal a fully intact, if a little charred, door.

"Oh, Whitney, you marvellous girl!" Stacey squealed, throwing her arms around Whitney. "I knew you had it in you! I don't care that the door's still there, you're 427.376% more awesome than the average fourteen-year-old and I love you so much!"

Stacey smooched Whitney passionately and Durant nuzzled her ankles a little. Whitney smooched back, her door worries momentarily melting away.

"She's the Hero of Ideals, isn't she?" said Cheren knowingly.

"Of course. You know, Blake Stormheart, Whitney Blazeheart, different personalities, same devotion to justice..." said Blake, trying to look as if he'd worked it out long ago.

"I believe she would be known as the Heroine of Ideals," Zephyr corrected Cheren.

"Details!" Cheren snapped. "Idealistic heroine or no, we must get in through this door. Ideas, people?"

"Bash your oversized head against it?" Bianca proposed, it being a Tuesday, wherein she and Cheren were always at each other's throats.

"Yours might work better. There's hardly anything in it to be lost in the attempt," Cheren retorted. Then, suddenly, he gave a gasp of inexplicable triumph. "Nothing in it to be lost in the attempt. Nothing... in it... to be lost... in the attempt. Nothing in it! Gentlemen... um, ladies... people... chaps, we've been set up! If this door was a test for us, why not the entire building?" He spun right around on his toe, pointing dynamically at the door. "This gym is a fake!"

"A fake?!" cried Bianca.

"Do you really think Clay has enough money to build an entire fake gym just to confuse his challengers?" said Blake, not believing it for a moment.

"I knew there was something wrong with Clay!" Whitney fumed, believing it for considerably more than a moment.

"You mean you've met him?" said Bianca.

"Only indirectly," Whitney replied. "My brother Simon challenged him, and he lost terribly, so Clay put a pickaxe clean through his foot."

Blake's eyes widened. "Through his foot?! That's bang out of order!"

"Seconded," said Cheren.

"Thirded!" agreed Bianca.

"Zephyr and I are joint forth," said Stacey.

"I know it's out of order. I had to spend the best part of a month carrying the poor sap," said Whitney ruefully. "In any case, Clay is, at best, overzealous. He makes things hard for his challengers, then calls them cry-babies and the like if they complain."

"That's horrible!" said Bianca.

"Truly horrible," Cheren agreed distastefully.

"Thirded and fourthed," declared Stacey.

"Unforgiveable!" Blake shouted, balling his fists. "In the name of the truth, I shall-" he doubled over, clutching his head. "Oh,

Zephyr, Cheren, Bianca, did you have to?"

"Blake, I... I'm really, exceedingly sorry," said Bianca tenderly, doing her best to comfort Blake.

"It was definitely no way to awaken a legendary hero, that's for sure!" Stacey said angrily. Zephyr flinched.

"Come to think of it, Simon did mention a fake gym," Whitney pondered. An idea struck her from out of the blue. "Perhaps we should try in that cave over there."

Cheren looked around suspiciously. "Cave? What cave?"

"\_That\_ cave," Whitney clarified, pointing to a dark cave entrance, its many stalactites and stalagmites looking suspiciously like teeth.

"Oh. I never noticed that before..." said Cheren sheepishly.

\* \* \*

><p>Whitney punched the air triumphantly as the Magnificent Many came to a large battle arena, carved out of the bare rock. "I knew it was in this cave! Hey, Clay, you've got five new challengers!"<p>

At the other end of the arena, a middle-aged man with flared trousers and a cowboy hat glanced over his shoulder at the Magnificent Many. Realising they probably weren't just there to take a survey, Clay reluctantly got to his feet and stumped over to the group.

"So, y'all think yer some kinda suitable match fer me, huh?" Clay drawled, his accent revealing a clear connection to Unova's historic American settlers (who were responsible for much of the region's cuisine, including Humilau City's world-famous grilled cheese pie). "Well, Ah cain't say Ah'm lookin' forward to this, but the Arceus-damned pokÃ©mon league'll be all up in mah business if'n Ah leave challengers in the lurch." He sighed deeply. "Git yer pokÃ©-balls out an' form an orderly line."

The Magnificent Many formed an orderly line while Clay headed back over to his side of the arena.

"Now, then. Who's first?" asked Clay.

"Me," said Whitney.

"You?" Blake asked.

"Her," Stacey confirmed.

"I believe so," said Bianca.

"Then that's settled," said Cheren.

Whitney, looking both sure of herself and determined to avenge her brother's foot, stepped onto the battlefield, followed by Durant.

"You're up first, Durant. Go for it!" Whitney declared. Durant gave

her a smile which would terrify pretty much anyone else, taking his place in front of her.

"Not much of a durant," said Clay gruffly. "Anyway. Krokrok, Ah, choose you!"

He released a tall, stripy reptilian pok  mon with a mean look in her eyes.

"Use stone edge!" Clay ordered. Krokrok gathered up some sharp stones and hurled them at Durant.

"Evasive agility!" Whitney commanded. Durant zoomed off to the side, skidded around to face his enemy and rushed behind Krokrok, who was still staring at the dust cloud left behind.

"Now hit her with everything you've got!" Whitney shouted triumphantly. Durant gladly obliged, his head turning shiny and metallic as he headbutted Krokrok across the arena. She landed flat on her face with a plaintive cry, but Durant wasn't done yet; claws outstretched, he pounced on Krokrok and slashed her right across the arm, then bit her snout. He had to hold back, of course; Krokrok would be needing her teeth in future.

Whitney gave a whoop of joy, and Clay, scarcely able to believe his eyes, recalled Krokrok.

"Well, dayumn..." Clay muttered, giving Krokrok's pok  -ball a hard stare. He cleared his throat. "Your durant's better'n I were expecting, but you ain't close to victory yet. Since you only needed one pok  mon t'beat Krokrok, you're allowed one more for mah next, as well as Durant."

"Eh?" Whitney looked at Durant. "Well, fine. Can't say I'm used to gym leaders varying things like that..."

"Ah like t'really challenge mah challengers, if'n ya get mah drift," Clay smiled. "Think yer tough? Like, exceedingly tough? This is where folk come t'prove it!" He retrieved a second pok  -ball. "Excadrill, go!"

With a howl of primal fury, Excadrill burst into reality, his claws thrust skywards.

"This should be interesting," Whitney said quietly. "Durant, use attack pattern beta!"

Durant dove into the arena floor and tunneled at Excadrill.

"Ha!" Clay laughed. "While he's down there, use fissure."

"Xcadrill!" Excadrill roared, smashing the ground with all his might. The floor split with a deafening crack and a web of dark, seemingly bottomless fissures spread out around Excadrill. In agony, Durant climbed out of one of the chasms, squeaked pitifully and fainted.

Speechless with horror, Whitney ran over to Durant, fell down a chasm, climbed out, made an obscene gesture at Excadrill and gave her

beloved metal ant pok  mon a thorough examination.

"You're fine," Whitney proclaimed, visibly relieved. She gathered Durant up in her arms and carried him over to the others, careful to avoid cracks. She and Stacey lowered Durant to the ground.

"Quite a powerful excadrill," Cheren commented.

"Maybe, but we'll take him," said Whitney, still confident.

"I bet you will," agreed Blake.

"Thanks," said Whitney, all smiles.

"Will y'all stop drivelling on and get back to battlin'?! " Clay shouted, stamping his foot.

"All right, all right, keep your hair on..." said Whitney. "Let's see now..."

She retrieved a pok  -ball, and, realising who was in it, grinned even more. "I have the perfect pok  mon for this battle. Go Sigilyph!"

And with a flash of light, the sigilyph from the Desert Resort emerged, her eyestalk held high and fork-like tail fluttering cheerfully in the lack of wind.

Clay rolled his eyes. "Unbelievable. Excadrill, metal claw!"

Excadrill's claws turned steely grey, singing through the air as he lunged at Sigilyph.

"Light screen!" Whitney ordered, and Sigilyph gladly obliged, raising a screen of solidified light in front of her.

Excadrill dug his claws into the screen, climbed over and sat on Sigilyph, forcing her onto the ground.

Whitney bit her lip. Climbing over a light screen... what kind of excadrill was this? "Quick, push him away with psychic!"

Sigilyph's eye glowed bright pink, matching her mental energy, and she sent a wave of psychic force over Excadrill. The mole pok  mon barely flinched, staying right on top of Sigilyph.

"Our turn, Ah believe," said Clay smugly. "Thunderpunch!"

Excadrill clenched his claws into a fist-like shape, set it ablaze with sparks and socked Sigilyph right in the central body.

"Oh, no! No no no no no and then some!" Whitney wailed, seeing the pain and fear plainly written on Sigilyph's face. "Unmitigated disaster... is it my fault?" She thought for a moment. "Well, technically, it's Excadrill's fault for being so strong, or maybe Clay's fault for being such a good trainer, so I can't afford to beat myself up over it. But I digress..." Whitney sighed. "Clay, there's no way defeating Krokrokok is comparable to defeating Excadrill. If I'm only allowed two pok  mon-"



"You should be able t'do better," Clay interrupted. "Do ya forfeit, or is poor lil' Sigilyph gettin' her wings torn off?"

Whitney, her silence deafening, thumbed the button on Sigilyph's poké-ball, recalling the greatly relieved pokémon. "Guess I'll have to avenge Simon later..." she muttered, trudging back over to her pals.

Blake knew he should say something, but he wasn't sure what. Someone who'd suffered such a serious disappointment deserved some kind words, a shoulder to cry on, a-

"I'm next. Whitney, there's no way my future brother-in-law's foot is going unavenged!" Stacey said fiercely, her eyes looking almost crystalline. (She was a bug-type specialist, so fiery eyes weren't her thing.)

"I... uh, thank you," said Whitney, a little taken aback.

So was Blake. On the other hand, it saved him a bit of effort.

"Wish me luck, everyone," Stacey invited the Magnificent Many as she headed over to the battlefield.

"Good luck, Stacey!" called Blake, Bianca, Whitney and Zephyr.

"I shall certainly look forward to seeing the outcome of this battle," Cheren said levelly.

"You ain't got a chance," Clay predicted. "Excadrill, return." He returned. "Krokorok, come forth once more!" With a flash of light, Krokorok came forth once more, looking a little apprehensive.

"Leavanny, I choose you!" Stacey declared, releasing the familiar tall, leafy pokémon.

"Oh, goin' fer type advantages, are we?" said Clay sardonically. "Pathetic. Krokorok, flamethrower!"

Krokorok inhaled as hard as she could and breathed out a roaring column of exothermically reacting air, which Leavanny somersaulted away from as if was barely moving.

"Not what I was expecting, but we'll work with it," said Stacey calmly. "String shot!"

Leavanny clearly approved of that choice, looking quite cheery as she ran rings around around Krokorok and trussed her up like an unfezant.

"Wicked. Now use fury cutter!"

Leavanny's leafy hands glowed dark green and she slashed the helpless Krokorok upside the snout, knocking her onto her back.

"Keep up the furious cutting!" Stacey ordered. Leavanny flashed her a dashing smile and slashed at Krokorok as if she was mashing potatoes.

"Nice "ash" rhymes," said Bianca quietly.

"Krokoouo!" Krokrook screamed. "Krokrook rok krokor!"

"Ah, shuddup," said Clay heartlessly. "It's fer the greater good, y'know?"

"...Greater good? Leavanny, stop for a bit," said Stacey. "Clay, what exactly do you mean by "greater good"?"

"Nothin' you need t'worry your head about," Clay reassured her, recalling Krokrook. "Mind you don't cry all over th'insides of yer poké-ball, all right? Now, girl, yer allowed one more pokémon to battle mah Excadrill with, so choose well."

He threw Excadrill's poké-ball into the air. Excadrill burst forth, still feeling pumped up from his victory against Durant and more than ready to kick some abdomen.

Stacey was getting seriously uncomfortable. "Clay... did you let us win against Krokrook so I could only use two pokémon to battle Excadrill?"

"Ah don't like yer tone, miss," Clay said coldly. "Are ya implyin' that an honest gym leader like mahself'd resort t'such awful trickery?"

"Maybe," said Stacey levelly. "As for my tone, you're the one being passive-aggressive."

"Shut yer face. Excadrill, crush that leavanny with metal claw!" Clay bellowed.

"Vanny?!" Leavanny cried, caught off guard as Excadrill pounced on her, claws galvanised, bearing her to the ground and slashing away like a demon. Rage building with every cut he made, Excadrill thrust his claws into Leavanny with all the hatred a pokémon could muster, finishing her off for good.

...Well, when I say "for good", I mean until Stacey gave her a revival herb, told Clay precisely what she thought of him and made for the nearest pokémon centre.

Blake, Bianca, Cheren and Zephyr looked at each other, all uncomfortable but unsure of what to do.

Whitney gave Clay a hard stare. "You're a monster."

"Seconded!" Cheren, Bianca, Zephyr and Blake chorused.

"Am Ah? You punks challenged me," Clay pointed out. "If yer pokémon can't take it, go back home an' take up stamp collecting."

"That's ridiculous! You've deliberately made things unfair on Whitney and Stacey, let Krokrook get hurt to give yourself an advantage, made Excadrill maul Leavanny-"

"Ah never asked him t'maul her," Clay growled. "Ah can't be held responsible fer mah pokémon's actions. They're free-thinkin' beings,

ain't they?"

"No, they're-!" Blake thought for a moment. "Yes, they're... that is... I..."

"We don't need to debate pok  mon ethics now," said Cheren. "The fact is, you're a disgrace to all gym leaders everywhere. Ever since I encountered Alder, I have been seeking to follow the right path-"

"Since when?" asked Bianca.

"Shut up," said Cheren. "Ever since I met Alder, I've been looking for the right path, and you're walking in completely the opposite direction!"

"Well, that I can agree with," said Bianca. "You're the worst gym leader ever! Except possibly Giovanni."

"Oh, am Ah?! And who're you t'come here tellin' me Ah'm substandard?" Clay demanded, hefting the pickaxe attached to his belt. "D'you brats want split feet?!"

"Not likely. I've got steel-toed boots," Whitney said smugly, gesturing to the new footwear she'd put on before the Magnificent Many left the pok  mon centre. "I knew this might happen, so I spun a highly complicated web of lies about my feet getting too hot in order to avoid spreading fear about you."

"You did?" said Zephyr, raising an eyebrow.

"Whitney, how could you?! We trusted you!" said Bianca, with tears in her eyes.

"They're just shoes, Bianca," said Blake heavily.

"Whatever. Clay, if you want to attack anyone's feet, you'll have to get through me!" Whitney declared, spreading her arms in front of her friends. "Come and get me, you fathead."

"Y'know, thar's lots of bits of ya that ain't pickaxe-proof," said Clay quietly. "Ah wonder how ya'd like a hole in yer skull... Yer brain'd get cold, fer starters, an' it'd hurt, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, this posturing is getting me down. Let's all just fight him and report him to the pok  mon league," Blake proposed, reaching for some pok  -balls. "Samantha, Darkblade, Darren, come forth!"

The tomboyish dewott, friendly audino and energetic darmanitan burst into reality.

Clay gave a quick, sharp laugh. "Y'really think them three're a match for \_mah\_ pok  mon?!"

"I believe he said 'let's all fight him'," Cheren pointed out, retrieving some pok  -balls of his own. "Sawk, Tranquill and Servine, I choose the three of of you!"

The mud-loving servine, fearsome tranquill and honourable sawk emerged with a flash of light, taking their places alongside Blake's

pokÃ©mon.

"Now, this is more like it! Go, Weezing and Reuniclus!" Whitney shouted, releasing her three-headed weezing and newly evolved reuniclus. "Weezing, get behind Samantha and poison any enemies who get in reach. Reuniclus, you're on light screen duty, all right?"

"Don't forget me," Bianca reminded everybody, reaching into her bag. "Let's see, now... Floella, Perdita and Templeton, I choose you!"

The cheerful frillish, abnormally personable liepard and sleepy pignite materialised in front of Bianca, some eager for battle and others asleep.

"Coming, Zephyr?" asked Blake.

"I'd be better off telling people what's happening, actually," said Zephyr, and she zoomed out of the cave, leaving behind a thunderous sonic boom which resounded with the power of Zekrom.

"Scaredy-cat..." Bianca muttered. "No offence," she added, remembering Perdita's feline nature.

"So, yer really goin' through with this?" asked Clay. "Well, if y'all wanna get creamed, that's fine by me. Garchomp, Tyranitar, Rhyperior, Seismitoad and Torterra, come forth!"

The Magnificent Many, sans Stacey, looked on in sudden terror as five of the most ferocious-looking ground-type pokÃ©mon in the world materialised. Their eyes were practically soulless, but they nevertheless managed to convey an attitude of barely-suppressed evil.

Clay chuckled. "Like 'em? This is mah elite battlin' team, perfect fer crushin' impertinent lil' reptiles like you scum." He gestured to the Magnificent Many. "Git rid of 'em!"

Bianca, terrified, tried to hide behind Cheren, clinging onto him for dear life. "We... we're not going to die, are we?!"

"Of course not! We're the Heroes of Truth and Ideals, a son of the Clan McTavish, a durant, a girl with a beret, several miscellaneous pokÃ©mon... why should we cower before Clay?!" Whitney demanded, her hands turning sharp and metallic in tandem with Durant's claws. "You can be afraid if you want, but I plan to give it everything I've got!"

A surge of truthful heroism welled up in Blake's heart, and he didn't try to suppress it this time. Zephyr being an overzealous fathead didn't matter one bit when Clay was on the rampage, and besides, it might make the inevitable forthcoming injuries seem a bit more worth it. "I'm with Whitney. Clay, you're a pitiful excuse for a gym leader, and that will not be changed by bullying. The truth can never die!" An aura sphere formed between Blake's hands.

Samantha looked adoringly up at him, then reminded herself she was an independent sort of a pokÃ©mon and gave her scalchops a quick

polish.

Cheren looked at Bianca. "Even if we don't have Aura powers, we can still fight in spirit beside our pok  mon, right?"

"True," said Bianca. "Guys, help yourself to any soul energy I can spare."

Templeton muttered something in his sleep.

"Oh, it's hopeless..." Cheren muttered. "Servine, Sawk, Tranquill, fight with all your strength in defence of what is true and proper, if you'd be so decent."

"Vine servine," Servine acknowledged.

"CAN WE PLEASE GIT ON WITH IT?!" Clay roared. "Hurry up an' kick some ass!"

"Right you are," said Blake. He threw his aura sphere at Clay's face, bowling the arrogant gym leader off his feet. "Let's revolve!"

"Roll..." Cheren sighed, ducking absentmindedly as Garchomp sent a dragon pulse his way, then unducking as Servine and Floella sent Garchomp flying.

"Either way's fine with me!" Whitney snapped, driving her claws into Torterra's shell-mounted tree in defiance of his thrashing vines.

"\_How about we just oscillate a little?\_" Perdita suggested, absentmindedly slashing Seismitoad across the stomach.

"We'll need to oscillate more than a little," Bianca pointed out. "An electric toothbrush might cut it..."

"Y'know, Ah was plannin' on givin' y'all gym badges if'n ya proved yer courage," Clay muttered. "Ah mean, ya don't really think the pok  mon league'd let a guy as horrible as me bully challengers fer real."

Cheren glared daggers at Clay. "Your excadrill could've killed Leavanny, stabbing her like that, and your treatment of Krokorok was unforgiveable."

Clay shifted nervously. "Well, Ah did say Ah weren't responsible for his actions... Look, Ah ain't sayin' Ah'm condinin' it, but y'know..."

"It's hard to believe you're a good person when you've set those five on us," Bianca pointed out, dodging through the raging battle over to Cheren and Clay.

"Uh... they're acting?" said Clay.

Bianca took a look at Torterra's eyes, which were completely dark and empty, as if all the kindness and general non-viciousness inside him had been forced out.

"You're an act," said Bianca. She reached into her pocket, retrieved a small plastic tube and pepper-sprayed Clay with impunity. "A sad act, I mean, not a class act. An act of cowardiness and horribularity!"

"Good show, Bianca! Brilliant spraying!" Blake said approvingly, pausing in the act of force palming Rhyperior in the solar plexus.

Bianca blushed. "Thank you."

"Garchomp! Chomp gar garch!" Garchomp wailed.

"\_She says she surrenders,\_" Durant translated. "\_And she wants it noted that there's no such thing as bad pokÃ©mon, only ones corrupted by humans.\_"

"I should coco. Hasn't she heard of Yveltal and Giratina?" scoffed Whitney. "Still, Garchomp, if you want to surrender, be my guest."

Garchomp curled up into a submissive, non-threatening ball, indicating that she was now Whitney's guest.

"\_Whut about ye, lad? Do ye surrender?\_" Lilly asked Seismitoad, in the peculiar lillipup, herdier and stoutland dialect.

"\_Whatevs...\_" Seismitoad grunted.

"Then that's settled," said Cheren loudly, taking charge of the situation as usual. "We'd best take Clay to the authorities, and take the pokÃ©mon to..." He thought for a moment. "Do we take them to the police or the pokÃ©mon centre, or just release them into the wild? Or something? I mean, they're not... are...?"

"To the pokÃ©mon centre, of course," said Whitney knowledgeably. "They'll've had to deal with maladjusted pokÃ©mon before. Not much, but it can happen, can't it?"

"Exactly what I was thinking!" Cheren declared, making for the cave exit. "Come, Magnificent Many. Our duties in this city are far from over."

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning, at quarter past the crack of dawn-<p>

"Hey! I resent that!" Dawn cried angrily.

Ash stared at her. "...Resent? What?!"

"Uh... nothing," said Dawn, turning bright red.

-the Magnificent Many's overall mood was rather subdued.

"I still can't get over Clay..." Bianca said quietly, her eyes wide and soulful and brimming with emotion. "I mean, he didn't care about Krokotorok at all, he damaged Whitney's brother's foot, he... he was awful!"

"Bianca, I'm trying to concentrate," Cheren growled, his eyes not once leaving the morning's episode of Star Trek. (They didn't have five in a row all the time.) "If you've got emotional problems, talk to Blake."

"I tried that, but he's still wedged under the bed. He looked so peaceful there I couldn't bear to disturb him," Bianca replied. "Do you suppose Clay was bullied when he was a little boy, and he's trying to punish everyone in the world for being mean to him?"

"Yes, Bianca. That is exactly what I think is happening." Cheren gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Although, now that you mention it, this puts a bit of a hole in our gym-related plans. Um... would you be agreeable to the notion of a trip to Aspertia City?"

Bianca blinked. "Aspertia Whatty?"

"City!" groaned Cheren. "It's a city with a normal-type gym leader, I believe, that's... completely out of our way." He thought for a moment. "How about Humilau City?"

"Humiwhat City?" asked Bianca.

Cheren sighed. "We'll cross this bridge when we get to it, all right?"

"Bridge?! Well, all \_right\_! I love bridges!" Bianca fell silent for a moment, but it was not to last. "Hey, Cheren, d'you Zephyr's finished breakfast yet?"

"Potentially," said Cheren tersely.

"Mm-hmm. Have you ever had a legendary pokÃ©mon cook for you before?"

"No..."

"Me neither. I hope she does pancakes. We both like pancakes, don't we? And omelettes. You can't go wrong with an omelette!" Bianca thought for a moment. "Where do you suppose the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation are gonna attack next?"

Cheren had had it. "I've had it!" he roared. "IS IT TOO MUCH TO ASK THAT I GET TO ENJOY SOME QUALITY TELEVISION IN PEACE?! The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation can conquer the world, for all I care, just LEAVE ME-"

There was an explosion.

"...Alone?" Cheren stopped short in mid-rant. Slowly, he rose to his feet, stepped over to the window and examined the area; sure enough, there was smoke rising from the south. Cold storage. These P.L.A.S.M.A people had outdone themselves.

"Bianca," said Cheren quietly, "get Blake out from under the bed, will you, and tell him this whole sleeping under the bed thing had better stop." He reached for his hat, pulled it on, adjusted his glasses, tightened his scarf, wheezed, loosened his scarf and opened the door. "It was shaping up to be such a lovely day, too..."

## 20. Chapter 20: Ghetsis Flips Out

**\*\*~Chapter Twenty: Ghetsis Reveals his True Colours, and Driftveil City gets a New Gym Leader~\*\***

Outside Driftveil City's cold storage warehouses, there was a bit of an affray going on. The scorchmarks on the warehouses bore witness to some rather nifty plasma cannons, made by the same people who came up with the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's acronym, and there were several blast craters left over from pok  mon attacks. Thanks to Sharon, the newly-minted Genesect Queen, one of the craters was big enough for a passing family of wailords to take a little nap after filling it with water.

"The stunts your P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation pull are beginning to wear a little thin, you so-called Harmonia. Either leave our cold warehouses immediately, or you will be shown no mercy." Driftveil City's chief of police, who was, of course, a green-haired woman called Jenny, had had a long day dealing with Clay, and the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation were simply too much.

"No mercy? How typical," N replied. He had little reason to be afraid; the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation outnumbered the Driftveilites two to one. "Whenever anyone tries to make a positive difference to this world, all you people want is to stop them. Do you honestly think evil can triumph forever?!"

"Of course not. You haven't triumphed, have you?" Jenny pointed out.

"Oh, how could I forget? From your point of view, we're evil!" N cried, feigning hurt feelings. "We want to prevent pok  mon exploitation, so we must be evil. See how these idiots' minds work?!"

The few P.L.A.S.M.A agents not hiding in the warehouses gave a unified shout of anger.

"Excuse me?! Haven't we just updated the laws to make it clearer that a pok  mon can be prime minister?" one of the Driftveilite crowd pointed out.

N blinked. "Uh... haven't you?"

"We have, actually," said Jenny. "Before you started kidnapping pok  mon, most people were prepared to listen."

"Well... good on you," said N, in a small voice. "Er..."

"What are you waiting for?! Tell them the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation will never fail!" Ghetsis hissed.

"Actually, in light of recent developments we... uh... might need to rethink things," N mumbled.

"What are you saying?! We need to make an impact on the world!" Melissa snapped.

"We were doing just fine before we became outlaws," N pointed



out.

"But-! Well, we... uh..." Melissa thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, all that really happened to change things was Ghetsis shouting at us."

"You know, I think you're right. I was kind of confused by his lack of thought-out arguments and reasoning, but at the time I put it down to stress," said N thoughtfully. "Ghetsis... I think you made a bit of an error in judgement, getting us to do this terrorist stuff."

"...What?" said Ghetsis quietly.

"Us attacking places, taking away pokÃ©mon from every trainer in the land and generally being loud and violent wasn't really necessary. I mean, it has been working, but... there might have been a more peaceful way." N paused. "I mean... I think so, unless... well, I'm not sure."

"Not sure? I mean... WHAT?!" Ghetsis roared. "I made you the man you are today, and you repay me with this blatant disloyalty?! I WON'T STAND FOR IT!" He punched N in the stomach, sending the P.L.A.S.M.A king sprawling on the ground. Turning to face the P.L.A.S.M.A army, he went on, "Listen up, you pack of ingrates! I intend to conquer the world one way or another, and..." Ghetsis suddenly became aware of several gazes boring into him, causing him to turn pale. "Er... what I mean is..."

"Oh, I think you've made it pretty clear what you mean," said Melissa coldly. "You've been playing us ever since we were children. YOU SHAMELESS, SELFISH, INCORRIGIBLE BLACKGUARD!"

"I... that's just a guess!" Ghetsis protested. "I mean, you can't-"

Heidi swung her tail around, knocking Ghetsis's feet out from under him.

"It's a bloomin' educated one," said Melissa, satisfied. She lifted a weebegone N to his feet. "N, we don't need this pitiful excuse for a sage any more. We'll change the world the proper way! Or at least one of several proper ways! Who's with us?!"

"YEAH!" shouted the majority of the P.L.A.S.M.A agents.

"Dreigon!" Heidi agreed.

"Rott samurott...?" said Samuel unsurely.

"Pius tropius," Trillie pointed out.

"SamuROTT rott-samu?!" Samuel cried. "Rott-sam samurott..." He spat at Ghetsis. "Samu samurott. Murott!"

"I love you guys!" one of the genesects pointed out, with tears in her eyes.

Sharon, her red exoskeleton unmistakeable in the well-lit warehouse courtyard, gave the weepy genesect a withering look. "Can't you at

least pretend to take this seriously?"

"Yah boo and sucks to you with knobs on! We're with Ghetsis!" a vocal minority chorused.

"Eh, net gain's good enough. To the helicopters!" Melissa shouted, and half-carrying N, she rushed off to the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's parked helicopter fleet. A horde of confused and/or excited P.L.A.S.M.A agents followed.

"I... but...!" Jenny protested, dimly aware that she ought to intervene but unsure of how to proceed. "You're still enemies of the state!"

"I'd worry more about him, if I were you," one of the crowd suggested, pointing at Ghetsis. The shockingly unmasked dark lord was in a towering fury, shouting at his turncoat agents, at N and Melissa, and occasionally even at himself. His eyes had turned red, too, which was a worry.

"You're right. We'd better deal with him," Jenny conceded. "By the way, when are those pok mon trainers who helped expose Clay getting here? We could use their strength if things get--"

"Here now!" Cheren panted, screeching to a halt beside the crowd. Sweat was pouring off him. "Got held up. \_(huff huff)\_ Blake's fault. \_(huff huff)\_ Couldn't get out \_(huff huff)\_ under bed."

Jenny gave him a look, noticing through the corner of her eye the zebstrika, durant and the other four kids arriving behind him. "Is it really too much to ask that you people show up on time?"

"It's not my fault!" Cheren protested. "I fail to see how I am to blame for this when that \_idiot boy\_ insisted on sleeping under the bed."

Blake looked at his feet.

Jenny sighed. "Well, you're here now, and that's what matters. Long story short: Ghetsis is really evil and the rest of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation have run away."

The Magnificent Many shared a few confused looks. Jenny, ignoring them, addressed her enemies. "Ghetsis, you seem to be outnumbered now, so would you care to surrender?"

Ghetsis thought for a moment, absentmindedly pulling his cloak tighter around himself against the downdraughts of the fleeing helicopters and genesects. "Er... there's two hundred-odd of you, fifty P.L.A.S.M.A agents loyal to me... dream on." Wisps of dark energy gathered on the tip of his staff as he retrieved some pok -balls from a hidden pocket. "Let's see you deal with the peons of Dark Aura. Shadow Lugia, Shadow Ho-oh, Shadow Charizard, come forth!"

Three rather nasty-looking pok mon burst into existence: a massive black dragon, a ginormous purple phoenix and a dark orange dragon, all with glowing red eyes like their master's. Shadow Ho-oh and Shadow Ludia gave a deafening roar, one hurling fire and the other hurling air up into the sky. Shadow Charizard cringed, wishing not

for the first time that he was a little bit bigger.

"I may not have Reshiram under my thumb, but these three are almost as good," said Ghetsts proudly. "It's all thanks to the dream mist! That stuff can make dreams come true, and my dream..." he paused dramatically, "is to conquer the world! Hahahahahahaaaa!"

"Hurrah! Good on ya! Ghetsis for prime minister! Go P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation!" was the general consensus of Ghetsis's cronies.

Whitney rolled her eyes. "If I'd known there was going to be this much posturing, I'd have slept under the bed myself. Whatever. Let's get 'em!"

Jenny shot her a look. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm the one who says "let's get 'em", not you." She waited for a moment, watching Whitney turn incandescent with rage, then slowly calm down. "Let's... wait for it, wait for it... have to choose just the right moment... get 'em!"

\* \* \*

><p>Before we become too embroiled in the getting of 'em, let us now turn our attention to a furious grand marshall and despondent king, flying steadily over the forests south of Driftveil City.<p>

"Where are we going, exactly?" asked the pilot, a young woman with purple hair who had turned out to be more than just a good messenger.

"Good question. N, where shall we go?" Melissa asked.

"He was all I had!" N wailed, still curled up in a little ball of despair. His hat was gone, lost when Ghetsis clobbered him, along with his usual bright, cheery demeanour. "W-when my parents died, I... I didn't have anything, and the social services w-wouldn't take me in because I wasn't a pokÃ©mon trainer, and... and Ghetsis was my only hope, I mean, when Purrloin g-got herself killed defending me, I lost everything even though I'd only just met her and...!"

"N, I... Nothing I can say could possibly change what that miserable, good-for-nothing excuse for a sage did to us, but we still have a cause worth doing stuff for. You can't give in to despair!" Melissa explained. "Take us back home, please," she added, glancing at the pilot.

"Of course I can give in to despair! I'm naturally despairing!" N wailed.

"You can't say that! No-one's naturally despairing, it's just... uh... what are you saying?"

"Naturally," N breathed, slowly but surely uncurling himself. "Nat-u-ral-ly." He rose to his feet, his mouth half-open and the light of a newfound breakthrough in his eyes. "Naturally. Natural!" He grasped Melissa's shoulders, ecstatic. "I'd forgotten all this time. My name is Natural Gropius Harmonia! ...Wait, all along? As in... before Ghetsis adopted me? That can't be right."

He looked down from Melissa's eyes; just as well, as she could no

longer hide her amusement at his name.

"Unless... I actually am a Harmonia, and I just happened to be adopted by another one..." said N thoughtfully. "Melissa, you know how I could never seem to find anything out about my real ancestry? I think it's time for another try."

"Well... great!" Events were moving a bit too fast for Melissa's liking, but she met them with the same vim and vigour as anything else. "But, hang on a minute. Weren't you in the grip of existential despair a minute ago?"

"Yeah. So?" N asked.

"So... you shouldn't just brush it off," said Melissa. "Emotional scars take time to heal."

"Oh. Yes, I see your point," said N. "Um... I've lost one of the people in my life most dear to me, leaving me emotionally vulnerable. I suppose, then..."

He threw his arms around Melissa, smooching her passionately and at great length.

"W-wait! I, uh... this might not be the best way to heal," said Melissa quickly, gently but firmly pushing N away. Her cheeks flushed red. "Besides, um, the pilot can hear us. And we shouldn't stand up in a helicopter, anyway."

"True," N acknowledged sheepishly. "Well, we'll see how things go..."

\* \* \*

><p>A white-hot blast of flame raged across the battlefield, cutting down all but the sturdiest warriors, of which there were distressingly few. For Blake, fighting reluctantly as best he could alongside Zephyr and all his pokÃ©mon, it was as if a wall of heat had fallen on him, even though the actual fire missed, and he collapsed as if being sat on by a snorlax.<p>

"\_Oh, get up and stop being a wimp. It's just a little backdraught,\_" Samantha encouraged him.

"Thanks a bunch, Samantha. Our wonderful bond of love and friendship means a lot to me, too," Blake snarked, rising unsteadily to his feet. He was pretty sure the fight was going well; Shadow Lugia had fallen to a well-placed ice beam, Ghetsis had fled northwards, most of the evil P.L.A.S.M.A agents were beaten and Whitney seemed to be riding a rapidash. Then again-

"Chaaaaarrrrr!" Shadow Charizard howled, taking out Driftveil City's entire ballet dancing troupe (who did kung-fu in their spare time) with a hurricane of fire. It had turned out the only things between Shadow Charizard and glory were his own mental inhibitions.

"He'll be our target, then," said Blake. "Zephyr, I imagine he's weak to electricity, so you give him a little jolt of volts." Brilliant rhyme; too little time to enjoy it. "Samantha, we'll follow up with some water pulses. Lilly, Patrick, Georgina, Darren, Darkblade, give

us cover."

"Interesting plan. I shall be glad to follow along," Zephyr acknowledged.

"Dewott dew dewott!" said Samantha tomboyishly.

"Dier herdier! Watch-watchog. Boldore-orebold. Manitan! Audino audino," the other five acknowledged.

"In that case, move ou-"

A throh, probably working for Ghetsis, punched Blake in the stomach. Thinking fast despite the agony, Blake retrieved his rolling pin and biffed the throh upside the head, catching her off-guard. A quick fire punch from Darren sealed the deal.

"\_Yay! We did it!\_" Darkblade declared, jumping for joy.

"A bit of it," said Blake shakily. He looked over his shoulder and was alarmed to see a pair of zangooses calmly taking tea right in front of Shadow Charizard. There was no time to wonder why they'd have tea in the middle of a small war; it was now or never. "AsIswassayingbeforebeingsorudelyinterruptedMOVEOUT!"

In a flash, Zephyr moved out, charge building up around her mane as she flew at her enemy. She smashed right into Shadow Charizard's belly, electrocuting him with all her might, and the two of them fell to the ground in a sparking heap.

There was no time to worry about whether Zephyr was all right. Blake and Samantha readied their water pulses as one, hurling them at the more charizard-ish parts of the sparking heap. Judging by the subsequent roar of pain and fury, they'd hit their mark.

"\_That's shown him. Now let's finish it!\_" Samantha said fiercely, raising her scalchops with plainly violent intentions.

"Up close?!" Blake cried, suddenly aware that Samantha's body was just the right size and shape for a charizard's talons to hold. If Shadow Charizard wasn't as unconscious as he seemed, Samantha would be in dire straits. "Wait for us!"

Blake and his cohort of pokÃ©mon ran after Samantha as best they could, with just a few seconds to silently marvel as she somersaulted onto Shadow Charizard's back and slashed away like mad, then stare in horror as Shadow Charizard nailed her with a thunder punch, stomped on Zephyr's foot and rampaged straight at them.

Blake knew he had to think fast. He was used to it by now, though, so that wouldn't be much of a problem. "Rock tomb!"

Georgina's crystals glowed bright red, summoning up a cascade of boulders to hurl at Shadow Charizard. The inexplicably shadowy pokÃ©mon couldn't slow down in time to get out of the way, still roaring defiance at everyone in earshot as the rocks buried him with a series of decisive thumps.

"Brilliant tomb! Very rocky!" said Blake appreciatively. "It'd be extremely effective, too, so..." a nagging psychic sense at the back

of his mind drew his attention back to Samantha. "You were brilliant there, Sam. Just like a lucario, except even cooler!"

"\_Well, I try,\_" Samantha blushed. "\_Wait... Sam?\_"

"\_Perfectly good nickname, nice an' trustworthy,\_" Darren pointed out. "\_Now let's get back to fightin', what-what!\_"

"\_Oh, yeah! Let's!\_" Lilly squeaked, jumping for joy.

"\_I can't say I find a full-scale war especially pleasant or engaging, but I shall gladly do my bit to secure the prosperous future of Unova,\_" Patrick agreed.

"\_Apples!\_" said Darkblade. (We don't really like to enquire too deeply into his thoughts, so just roll with it, unless you're a psychologist.)

"\_Apples, precisely. If my rock tombs can have even half as great an effect, we are pretty much assured of-\_"

A blast of sacred fire from Shadow Ho-oh washed over the pokÃ©mon like a tidal wave of destruction, sending them all into unconsciousness.

Blake stared open-mouthed at his fainted pokÃ©mon, hardly able to believe what his eyes were telling him.

"I... this... I... oh, just typical."

And, partly out of sympathy, he fainted.

\* \* \*

><p>"Tell me," said Blake grumpily, having regained consciousness inside Driftveil City's cave-arena, "is me passing out going to be a regular thing?"<p>

"I hope not, but we can never tell," said Whitney. "How are you feeling, then?"

"No palpitations? Sussurations? Mesmerations? Litigations?" asked Bianca worriedly.

"We saved an omelette for you," Cheren added, gesturing to a brown paper bag he was holding.

"Brilliant. It's always nice to have friends like you," said Blake, with as much sincerity as he could muster under the circumstances. He carefully raised himself into a sitting position, doing a quick check of his surroundings: there appeared to be an amphitheatre carved into the cave walls now, and, in addition to the Magnificent Many, it was packed.

"Something going on?" asked Blake.

"Yah. They're choosin' a new gym leader, don't'cha know?" asked the rapidash who seemed to have attached himself to Whitney. "Speakin' of which, we haven't really been introduced, have we? Name's Rashimo, Son of the Volcano, Avatar of Reshiram an' all that."

"Avatar of-?! Oh, of course," said Blake. It stood to reason. "I'm Blake Stormheart, the Hero of Truth."

"Dash pleased to meet you, Blake, old thing!" Rashimo declared. "When Zephie told me about you an' Whitney, here, I came like a shot, don't'cha know? A shot, what-what!"

"Er... I must introduce you to my darmanitan at some point," said Blake faintly. "Er, Cheren, you mentioned an omelette..."

"Breakfast was several hours ago," Cheren explained. "We saved you some, but then it got cold, so Bianca ate it. This omelette is part of our luncheon, preserved for your delectation."

"Oh. Well, all's well that ends well," said Blake, taking the bag. "It's omelette time!"

As Blake ate his omelette, our two favourite battle strategists were enjoying the unfolding tournament.

"D'you think the bloke there with the magmortar might be in with a chance?" Stacey asked. "The other lady's got water-types, but the magmortar and her trainer've got a bond approximately 183.873% stronger than the national average."

Whitney stared at her. "National average?! You can't quantify friendship like that!"

"Can so," Stacey retorted. "For example, I am attracted to you with about 265.139% of the standard levels of devotion between two teenagers, and I estimate that you are similarly fond of me."

"That's ridicu-" Whitney stopped short. "...Really? 265.139%?"

"Only to six significant figures," Stacey pointed out. "But basically, yeah."

Overcome by mushiness, Whitney threw her arms around Stacey and snuggled her with all her might. Stacey gladly hugged her right back.

"Isn't that sweet?" Bianca commented quietly. "I mean, if Whitney hadn't decided to come with us, she might never have met Stacey."

"I couldn't be less interested," Cheren contradicted her. "A son of the Clan McTavish has no time for this... involuntary, emotional stuff. Friendship is the best one can hope for."

"...I guess," said Bianca.

"What kind of idiot made this omelette?!" Blake fumed. "It's practically made of rubber!"

The entire Magnificent Many fell strangely quiet.

"I am responsible for the omelette," said Zephyr coldly. "Do you mean to imply that my cooking is substandard?"

"Well... yeah," said Blake, none too intimidated. "Perhaps I'll teach you how to cook..."

Zephyr said nothing.

"Don't get yer chakras in a twist, Zephie, old thing. Plenty a' time to learn cookin'!" Rashimo laughed. "That's assumin' ya don't end up crushin' all the utensils in yer dragon form."

"Oh, shut up," Zephyr grumped. "It's not polite to have such long, detailed conversations during a tournament, anyway. Can't we just watch?!"

"Er, Zephyr, it's finished," Whitney pointed out. "It was a tie."

Bianca considered that. "So... joint gym leaders?"

"No. They're going to decide it with arm wrestling," said a member of the crowd who had overheard Bianca. "My money's on the magmortar's trainer. He seems much more in sync with his arms."

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, against a backdrop of lush forest, gently cooled by the winds of Mistralton City, the two Professors Juniper were taking tea.<p>

"I'm glad that's over," Aurea commented absentmindedly. "Chargestone Cave is a period of my life I'd very much like to forget."

"I agree, but shouldn't we go back to see how those children you tasked with gathering pokémon data are getting on?" Cedric pointed out. "I mean, considering what happened yesterday..."

"They'll pull through," said Aurea blithely. "They never seem to not pull through."

She retrieved the newspaper she was sitting on, and had barely got through the first page when she jumped. "A snorlax?!"

"...What about one?" asked Cedric.

"There seems to be one wedged in the entrance to Chargestone Cave," said Aurea worriedly. "Witnesses reported about five humans in P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation uniform fleeing into the cave, and they were dragging a snorlax along in chains."

"Chains? The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation?! That can't be right..." said Cedric.

"It can. Bianca sent me a communique ahead of the official news reports about the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation splitting in two, so that snorlax must've been Ghetsis's doing," Aurea explained. "Father... if Ghetsis is coming here..."

"He wouldn't be. Even the most idiotic of criminals knows better than to visit a population centre like Mistralton City," Cedric reassured her. "He's probably struck out into the countryside, to Anville Town or somewhere."



"I see. We should tell the police, though, shouldn't we?" Aurea commented.

Cedric shrugged. "If it puts your mind at ease."

## 21. Chapter 21: Cheren Rescues a Snorlax

**\*\*~Author's Note~\*\***

This chapter is the longest one thus far, and, in my view, one of the best. I wrote much of it while completely off my head due to illness, so it may seem a little... different, a bit overloaded with plot twists, but you will hopefully enjoy it nonetheless.

No offence is meant to Denise Crosby, Jennifer Lawrence or Kate Mulgrew. Really, they should be glad I'm comparing them to such wonderful people as Stacey and Bianca.

Now, on with the story!

**\*\*~Chapter Twenty-one: The Obligatory Chapter with a Snorlax in the Way, and a Bittersweet Farewell~\*\***

"Cheren's log, Wednesday the twenty-seventh of June: Blake and Whitney's Aura powers are coming along in leaps and bounds, Stacey and Bianca have both had a haircut, and I myself am trying my utmost to connect more with my pokÃ©mon. Bianca looks a bit like Denise Crosby now, and Stacey looks like Kate Mulgrew. Astonishing coincidence. In any case, I feel I have developed greatly as a trainer. With every passing day, Serperior grows more tomboyish- I mentioned she had evolved in yesterday's log, in case you've forgotten- and Sawk's strength builds exponentially. Unfezant- he evolved too- is demonstrating some tremendous agility, in spite of his unaerodynamic feathers, and Herdier, who I am hoping will evolve within the week, is outstripping even Lilly. Cinccino remains a powerful and reliable ally. As for me, I do not think it too much hyperbole to say that I feel a deeper sense of-

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?" Whitney commented. "You never even mentioned Samantha and Templeton evolving as well. And what about Duosion, now that he's actually a reuniclus?"

"...Shut up. As I was saying, we have spent the past week camping out on route 6, and are now preparing to make for Chargestone Cave," Cheren went on.

"I don't really see the resemblance myself," Whitney went on. "Bianca looks like Jennifer Lawrence, as far as I can see. And Stacey just looks like Marilyn Monroe, or possibly Skyla."

"You think so?" asked the now bob-haired Stacey, who had finished tidying away the remains of last week's campfires. "Skyla's amazing! She's the next gym leader we're challenging, right?"

"Of course. Good exposition, by the way," said Bianca appreciatively, resplendant in her new pixie cut. "And I think I look like Elesä."

"You wish..." Blake muttered. "I mean, you've got spiky hair. She hasn't."

"Can we not, as it were, get a move on?" asked Zephyr archly. "Much as I love these meandering, long-winded conversations where nobody gets left out, I am a zebstrika. We do not stand still for long periods of time."

"Well said, old shoe!" Rashimo agreed. "Let's get a bloody move-on, what!"

\* \* \*

><p>And thus, a move-on they did get. Over chasms and crevasses, past quicksand and tar pits, dodging avelanching boulders and occasionally correcting Cheren's overactive imagination, the Magnificent Many trekked the length and breadth of route 6, arriving eventually at Chargestone Cave.<p>

"Look! There it is!" Bianca cried, pointing to what seemed to be a cave emerging behind the horizon. "It looks so stony and charged!"

"I think I'll try and capture a ferroseed," Blake decided. "With the right strategies, they're invincible!"

That was no hyperbole; Blake had once found a lost ferroseed in the back garden, along with several unconscious hydreigons.

"Good luck, then," said Whitney. "I've always liked Chargestone Cave... the electrical impulses help me think, and Durant lived there."

"And there'll be joltiks and galvantulas," Stacey pointed out. "So many, with so many eyes! I love them!"

Blake turned pale.

"Let us not forget the klinks and woobats," Cheren reminded the group. "And we should probably talk with those people trying to pull a snorlax out of the entrance... wait, what?"

Cheren looked at Stacey. Stacey looked at Whitney. Whitney looked at Blake. Blake looked at Bianca's hair. Bianca giggled, imagining herself dressed up as Elesa, Katniss, Lieutenant Yar, or whoever it was she looked like nowadays. Zephyr looked at Rashimo, who shrugged.

"I can tell looking at one-another isn't going to improve this situation," said Cheren heavily. "Let us proceed to the cave and take matters as they come."

"Fine by me," said Zephyr.

As the Magnificent Many drew closer to the cave, it became clear that there was indeed a snorlax wedged tight in the entrance, looking deeply disturbed by the ordeal she was going through. A lucario, a human, two palpitoads and a hawlucha, all wearing some rather fetching headbands, were attempting to pull her out.

Cheren approached the lucario. "Excuse me, young man, what exactly is going on here?"

"\_What does it look like?\_" the lucario retorted. Thanks to his enhanced Aura powers, he made himself audible to everyone, including Bianca, who had never been much of a poké-whisperer.

"It looks as if you are trying to pull this snorlax out of the cave entrance," said Cheren.

"Trying" is hardly accurate," the human (a woman, for the record) informed him. "This idiotic cave \_insists\_ on impeding us, but will succeed only in delaying the inevitable." She turned to address the cave, with fire in her eyes. "You hear me, you overgrown pothole?! You have raised the ire of Tabitha, daughter of Vera and Jethro, firstborn of the House of Galeweaver! I will not forgive this!"

The lucario sighed. "\_She's off again...\_"

"Such passion..." Cheren breathed. "A heart of woven gale, a soul of crystallised Tabitha-ness..." He raised a clenched fist, as he'd seen all the coolest pokémon trainers do on TV. "Tabitha, hear me! I am Cheren, son of Gerald and Christobel, firstborn of the House of McTavish, and I swear I will not rest until this snorlax is out of the door! I mean cave!"

"You will?!" cried Blake, Bianca, Whitney, Stacey, Zephyr, Rashimo and Durant.

"You do?!" cried Tabitha, somewhat taken aback. "Well... great! You probably don't need me pointing out that brute force hasn't worked so far; we're trying to come up with a new strategy."

"Indeed? Have you tried a lubricant?" asked Cheren, instantly back to his usual(ish) calm, on-the-ball self.

"We couldn't get enough," replied Tabitha.

"What about widening the cave?"

"Can't. This cave is a piece of history, a habitat beloved of countless pokémon, and long story short, the national trust won't let us."

"Ah. Come to think of it, snorlaxes have very soft skin, and their fur isn't too grippy... have you considered how she could be stuck there in the first place? I mean, the rocks don't have adhesive properties, and she isn't magnetic."

"No... Actually, that's a thought. You wouldn't happen to have an MRI scanner, would you?"

"Afraid not. I might have a hoof-picker, but..."

"Won't work. We've tried every kind of small metal implement... it just doesn't make sense!"

Blake leaned over to Bianca. "I can't help but feel a bit left out of the conversation."

"Me too..." said Bianca.

"Then there's no other explanation," Cheren decided. "This snorlax is a fake!"

"Lax?!" the snorlax cried. "Snor snorlax lax snorlax-snor!"

Cheren flinched. "Uh... well, perhaps not a fake. What must be happening... is... that... she... is\_ anchored to something inside the cave\_!"

"What?! How can... actually, it makes sense, but how?!" Tabitha demanded.

"Easy! Considering Ghetsis and his mates went to the trouble of dragging her here, they wouldn't want her to get away," Cheren replied.

Zephyr stared at him. "Ghetsis?! How do you know he was-?!"

"Of course, to un-anchor the snorlax, we'll need some means of getting inside the cave..." Cheren went on.

"Seriously," Zephyr went on, "what could possibly have told you-"

"A pokÃ©mon that can go straight through solid rock, maybe, without damaging it," Tabitha pondered. "Sableye?"

"Now, look. Ghetsis's involvement in this cave-"

"Wrong region," Cheren pointed out. "In order to enter... we will, taking into account all variables, need to... use... that is to say, go via..." He snapped his fingers triumphantly. "Back door!"

"WILL YOU STOP IGNORI-"

"The back door?!" Tabitha's eyes widened. How could she not have thought of that? Well, no matter. "Cheren, you're a genius!"

"\_He is?!\_" cried Lucario, Hawlucha, Palpitoad-A and Palpitoad-B.

"Swell," said Whitney.

"I know," said Cheren modestly. "Now, to get to the back door..." The look of triumph slowly drained from his face. "We... climb over the mountain. Or fly. Or tunnel under. That's... not going to be easy."

"Or," said Tabitha, "we simply destroy the cave entrance, then put it back together when we're finished."

"Really?!" cried Cheren. "How, exactly..."

"Simple! We take lots of pictures beforehand," said Tabitha breezily.

"WILL SOMEONE PLEASE PAY ATTENTION TO-"

"Perfect idea!" declared Cheren. "You're truly a queen among pokÃ©mon

rangers." He turned back to face the Magnificent Many. "Could you chaps get us some pickaxes, acid, saws, chisels, hammers, solvents and-"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait... Cheren, none of us are really sure what's going on," Whitney interrupted. "Couldn't we maybe-?"

"No time!" Cheren said quickly. "Pickaxes, acid, saws, chisels, hammers, solvents and a jackhammer. Off you pop!" He shoved Whitney away, catching her offguard, and ducked nimbly under a vengeful blast of fire. "Tabitha, assorted pokémon, we must plan at length. Let us retire to... wherever."

"\_Fine by me,\_" said Hawlucha.

"I can tell being with you is going to be one adventure after another, Cheren, son of Gerald and Christobel. Let's do it!" Tabitha agreed.

"\_You're all idiots,\_" said Lucario grumpily, but he went along with it.

"But... what do we do?! You've left us stark in the lurch!" Bianca protested.

"Get pickaxes, acid, saws, chisels, hammers, solvents and a jackhammer, I suppose," said Stacey. "And in this light you really do look like Denise Crosby."

"Is that a good thing?" asked Bianca.

"'Course!" replied Stacey. "And if I happen to resemble Skyla, that's good too, as far as I can tell."

"I concur!" said Whitney.

"While we're on the subject, I was thinking of growing a ponytail," Blake piped up. "It might... well... look more distinguished, or-"

"That. Is. The. Last. Straw. WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT HAIRSTYLES!" Zephyr howled. "If this idiotic McTavish boy absolutely insists, I suppose we could take a little time out of our busy schedule to go and find some digging equipment, but we'll do it properly, is that clear?!"

"...No," said Blake. "You're not the boss."

"Do you want a thunderbolt up the jacksy?!" Zephyr demanded.

Thinking it best to intervene, Whitney shot Zephyr such a glare as would make Palkia go weak at the knees. "None of us asked you to come along, you odious, malingering zebstrika twonk. We'll get Cheren and Tabitha the stuff they need our own way, and then you and I shall have words."

Zephyr glanced at Rashimo. "She really is a bit of an oaf, isn't she? I can't see why you chose her as the Heroine of Ideals..."

"Because she stands up to actual malingerin' oafs like you, Zephie, ya miserable excuse for a legendary pok  mon," said Rashimo good-naturedly.

"I am the embodiment of truth, Rashimo," said Zephyr haughtily. "I do not sugarcoat."

"That's rich, by Arceus!" Rashimo barked. "Yer the bluntest pok  mon who ever lived, what! No quarter given or taken with good old Zephie; the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' but the bloody truth."

"I wholeheartedly get what you mean. Oh, Blake," said Whitney, "do you suppose those two ludicrous displays need an intervention of some sort?"

Blake considered it for a moment, then grinned nastily. "Suppose we cosh Zephyr, leave her bound and gagged in Cold Storage, mentally programme her to be nicer..." He sighed; ambitions like that were best left well alone. "We'd be sinking to her level. I don't know... can modern psychology deal with legendary pok  mon?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Let's see, now," said Whitney, as the Magnificent Many reached a fork in the rather overgrown forest path. "I think the left path leads to the Temple of Digging Equipment, and the right..." She shivered. It was awfully cold for such a fine afternoon. "The right path might lead to Kyurem's lair."<p>

"Kyurem?!" cried Bianca.

"Yes, him," Whitney confirmed, not too worried by the concept.

"You'll probably have noticed how confusing Unovan geography can be," Blake added. "How else could we have bypassed all those small towns and villages on the road?"

"Uh... I never really thought about it."

"In any case, while it is an unfitting subject for an ancient temple, we must aquire the digging implements. Much as I hate to satisfy Cheren, we will need to get through Chargestone Cave at some point," Zephyr reasoned. "Right?"

"No, left," Whitney corrected her.

"I said left!" Zephyr snapped. "Well, I never said right... uh, sort of. I did, but... I digress... Look, I said left. I mean right! No, the other..." She took a deep, steadying breath. "We go... left, correct?"

"Right," said Whitney.

Zephyr felt as if she might cry, then thunderbolt Whitney a bit to cheer herself up. "Whitney... you just... said... left."

"No, I said right, as in, um, right you are. To confirm that we're going left," said Whitney.

"But we're going right!" Zephyr protested.

"Whitney, Zephyr... what are you even talking about?" asked Blake.

"She says we're going left," said Zephyr.

"We are going left," said Whitney heavily. "This could go on all day, so let's be off, all right?"

"I-!" Zephyr, in spite of her rather lax attitude to civil behaviour, knew when someone was talking sense, so she fell silent. Grudgingly.

\* \* \*

><p>"Remind me," said Cheren, two hours into a planning session and showing no signs of tiring, "do we eat the roasted peanuts before or after the treacle drains out of the colander? And once Snorlax has been freed, which way do we push her?"<p>

"Uh..." Tabitha quickly leafed through a few notes. "We eat the peanuts once the treacle's drained out, then push her to the right. If the caulliflower's fallen off the tower of durants, though, we'll need to stop her fast."

"Then we use the magnets!" Cheren decided. "One tied round each foot, brushing against the wheels... they'll slow her down in no time."

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Tabitha gravely. "We're counting on her false beard coming off once she gets past the shoe box, otherwise she'll go tumbling down into the valley."

"And land on the orphanage or the abandoned pokÃ©mon home..." Cheren said, slightly horrified. "Unacceptable. We'll just rig up a hook to take the false beard off!" He thought for a moment. "Uh, how does this relate to the magnets, anyway?"

Tabitha blinked. "Not sure. Perhaps we missed a step..."

"\_Excuse me.\_" Palpitoad-A waddled carefully in through the tent flap, balancing some glasses of berry juice on his head. "\_I've brought you some drinks, and Hawlucha's making potato bread for afternoon tea, so...\_"

"Jolly good. Have her send some in, will you?" said Cheren.

"\_Gladly. I'll just leave these here, then,"\_ Palpitoad-A decided, lifting the drinks down with his tongue and depositing them on one of the more stable stacks of paper.

"You're an angel!" said Tabitha gratefully.

\* \* \*

><p>Watching from afar, Lucario sighed and shook his head, although it was in an affectionate way. "<em>Humans, eh? There's so little we know about these fantastic, infinitely diverse creatures, in spite of how far we've come...<em>"

"\_Well, they do tend to keep all the best science for themselves,\_" Palpitoad-B pointed out. "\_But they don't know much about us pokÃ©mon, either.\_"

"\_I know!\_" Lucario chuckled. "\_Hawlucha, do you still want to be in a gym at some point?\_"

"\_I don't know...\_" Hawlucha didn't look up from her potato cake preparations, but Lucario could tell the question meant something to her. "\_I'd need to find a trainer, unless there's a gym which accepts independent resident pokÃ©mon. Having someone tell me what to do in a battle just wouldn't be my style. It's like with these potato cakes. I know how to do them, so I do them. Simple as that.\_"

"\_I wouldn't mind being trained,\_" Palpitoad-B said thoughtfully. "\_Tabitha already gives me strategic advice, so...\_"

"\_It's not exactly a black-and-white issue,\_" Lucario decided. "\_Do you suppose pokÃ©mon could train humans? I mean, I could certainly teach pretty much any reasonably athletic biped about martial arts...\_"

"\_So could I, come to think of it,\_" Hawlucha agreed. "\_And gliding, and making potato bread... Speaking of which, they're done.\_"

She took the pan of fresh potato bread off the campfire, indicating for Palpitoad-B to extinguish it, and carried the pan over to Palpitoad-A. "\_Take these to Tabitha and the other bloke, but not on your tongue, all right?\_"

"\_Wouldn't dream of it,\_" Palpitoad-A lied. Hawlucha lay a couple of potato bread pieces on top of his head, and he carried them into the tent.

Satisfied with a job well done, Hawlucha carried the plate back over to the other two, and they ate for some time.

\* \* \*

><p>"'Scuse me," said Bianca, as the Magnificent Many (sans Cheren) made their way through the Temple of Digging Equipment, "I've had a thought. What's the airspeed of an unladen Garchomp?"<p>

Blake, Whitney, Zephyr, Rashimo and Durant stared at her.

"How old?" asked Stacey promptly.

"Uh, fifteen," Bianca replied.

"Which gender?"

"...Male."

"Any medical conditions, injuries...?"

"No..."

The group found themselves entering a large, rectangular chamber, so vast that it seemed to suck away the light of Whitney's torch and



Rashimo's burning mane.

"Can he mega evolve?"

"I don't know... maybe?"

"Is he a Sinnohan garchomp or one of their middle European relatives?"

"How should I know?!" Bianca demanded.

"I'd need to know in order to work out his airspeed," Stacey quite reasonably pointed out. "Now shut up. I have this feeling-"

With a deep, booming rumble, the statue in the centre of the room opened its eyes, taking in the Magnificent Many. Slowly, inexorably, it rose to its feet, unsheathing the long, rusted spade slung across its back.

"-that there's a boss fight coming. Perfect timing!" Stacey grinned.

\* \* \*

><p>"That's that taken care of, then," said Cheren, brushing his hands together with a proprietorial air. He still wasn't sure just quite how they'd done it; Lucario was a brilliant engineer, sure, and Tabitha to have a knack for getting large objects in just the right place, while Palpitoad-B was the most mechanically minded pokÃ©mon he'd ever seen. It still defied belief, though; just how this colossal edifice of mismatched parts had arrived in front of Chargestone Cave was a mystery even to its designers.<p>

Noticing Snorlax's uneasy expression, Cheren stepped carefully over the helical ironing board and laid a comforting hand on what he could reach of her shoulder. "It'll be all right, Snorlax. My design know-how's never failed me yet."

"Snor snorlax snor?" Snorlax asked dubiously.

"I don't know... Somehow, I feel more alive now than I ever have before. " Cheren smiled; in the past, he'd always assumed he felt as alive as anyone could, which made it hard for him to improve. "It's like all my inhibitions have vanished into the wind..."

Cheren could see Tabitha over by the quantum resonator, resonating a few spare quanta. It must've been her, he knew. Somehow, she had made him have this weird mental awakening. "Tabitha, how's the quantum resonation going?!" called Cheren.

"Brilliantly," Tabitha replied, putting down her basket of quanta. "Have you depolarised the water skis, by the way?"

"Of course. Sawk's watching them," Cheren replied. "She took care of stuffing the watermelon into the trombone, too, and I managed to convince a passing cranidos to put the tights on his head. They might flap a bit, but they're bound to work with the kind of trouser press we're using. It's practically a jumpsuit press!"

"A dungaree press, at least," Tabitha agreed. "Now, all we need to do

is wait for the equipment..."

\* \* \*

><p>"Take this, you overblown cretin!" Bianca shouted, throwing a well-aimed stone right at the statue's head.<p>

"Bianca... we beat it five minutes ago," said Stacey, pausing in the act of packing away the digging implements. There was some good stuff here; the Master Spade, the Shovel of Holy Might, the Trowel of Fire, the Pickaxe of Winds, the Chisel of Ice, the Hammer of Courage, the Stoneworker's Acid of Hydrofluoricness, and the Jackhammer of General Brilliance. There was also a stash of gems split evenly between the party, with Bianca looking after Cheren's share.

"I know we've already won," said Bianca, looking slightly insulted. "I just wanted to try throwing a stone at it."

"Oh, really?" said Zephyr heavily. "If I'd known I were to travel with such a foolish and irresponsible child, I might've slept in."

"I'll teach you how to use rock-type attacks, if I ever learn any and you show any Aura potential," Blake offered.

"Really?!" Bianca gasped. "I mean... REALLY?! TRULY?! Oh, wow! I can't wait to be an Aura warrior!" She gave Blake an energetic hug. "You're so brilliant!"

Blake had been used to this for more than half of his life, so simply returned the hug, complete with a friendly pat on the back. "If the power's inside you, I'll externalise it."

"Oh, will you indeed?!" said Zephyr even more heavily, indicating that, ideally, he wouldn't. "And just what gives you the idea that Bianca is in any way a worthy practitioner of Aura?"

Blake shut his eyes, took a few deep breaths, and opened them again, forcing himself to remain calm. "I am not talking to you until you get off your high horse and start treating us like equals."

"...You're not my equals. Rashimo and I are legendary pokÃ©mon, created for the sole purpose of protecting ideals and truth, and in terms of power, none but Kyurem and the other legendaries can compare to us. Only Arceus can accurately claim to be our superior," said Zephyr pompously.

"In terms of power, yes," said Stacey, "but morality? No."

Zephyr stiffened. "And who are you to lecture me on morality?!"

"Stacey Rogers, aged fourteen years, ten months and twelve days," Stacey promptly replied.

A corona of lightning sparked up around Zephyr's mane as she stalked towards Stacey, looming over her like the shade of death. "I am Zephyr, Daughter of the Storm, Avatar of Zekrom, Guardian of Truth. I have lived since the very concepts of "truth" and "ideals" were first

invented, watching over the world for a timescale greater than your miniscule brain can ever hope to comprehend! My powers are such that not even Mewtwo could stand against me, and none who cross me ever live to tell of it! I am the Darkness and the Light, the Alpha and the Omega, the X and the Y, the FireRed and the LeafGreen-

"I've got all the gym badges in three regions, Zephyr. You can't intimidate me," Stacey pointed out.

"I... you understand nothing! As guardian of the truth, it is my... my solemn duty to... knock some sense into you people!" snapped Zephyr, falling off her stride a little.

"We don't want sense knocked into us! Either accept that fact or get lost!" snapped Blake.

Rashimo gave him a vaguely reproving glance. "Thought you weren't talkin' to her, old boy."

"You're welcome to get lost too," said Whitney.

"Us, get lost?!" Zephyr roared. "How dare you?! I... we're legendary pokémon! I am the most truthful being in the world! No, the universe! You impudent fools are nothing compared to my brother and I! Rashimo, I'm leaving. You're welcome to come."

"...I can't leave my sister behind," Rashimo decided. "Nice knowin' you, Whitney, old girl."

He clopped over to Zephyr, who very meaningfully turned her back on the Magnificent Many, and the two of them dashed off. The ensuing sonic boom was like a cannon blast in this confined space, sending everyone except Durant flying.

\* \* \*

><p>"Bianca, Blake, Stacey, Whitney, Durant! About time you got here," declared Cheren, loud and energetic. He was about to welcome the Magnificent Many back with some handshakes and pats on the back when he noticed Bianca was crying, Blake and Whitney were trying not to, and Stacey was looking after a distraught Durant. Zephyr and Rashimo were nowhere to be seen. "What happened, chaps? Something go wrong?"<p>

"Z-Zephyr left us!" Bianca sobbed, unable to meet Cheren's gaze. "And Rashimo. Th-they said the most horrible things, and-!" She broke off, falling into Whitney's shoulder, where she wept as if she were a watering can.

"We're better off without those scumbags," said Blake grimly. "We Unovans stand on our own two feet!"

"...You'd better come and have some potato bread," Cheren decided. He led his friends past the colossal machines erected outside Chargestone Cave, which were spared only a few curious glances, to the command tent.

\* \* \*

><p>Hawlucha had turned out to be quite a prolific chef, so there was

plenty of potato bread available. As the dejected Magnificent Many ate, and Lucario, Hawlucha and the palpitoads enjoyed a game of skittles outside, Cheren and Tabitha maintained a constant dialogue. Or tried to, at least.<p>

"Basically, what we've done is to create a multi-dimensional quantum hyperbolic charge field around the cave, using the electromagnetic radiation from within. We've erected a system to safely bring Snorlax away from the cave entrance, then-"

There was a colossal, splintering crash, which seemed as if it might go on forever.

"...The treacle?" said Tabitha.

"THE ORPHANAGE!" Cheren wailed, leaping to his feet and rushing out of the tent.

"What?! What, what, what, what... I mean, an orphanage?! We've got to stop whatever disaster might be about to unfold! Come on!" Whitney cried, leaping to her feet. She was wearing her wellies again, in case you want to know.

"Right. Emotional problems and Zephyr and stuff can hang!" Blake agreed, shoving aside the tent flap and rushing off after her, dimly aware of Stacey, Durant and Bianca following. On instinct, Blake reached for one of his pok  -balls, then thought better of it when a procession of durants ran over and around his feet, fleeing a collapsing pile of wood and metal. It had been crudely bolted together, and was now in pieces.

"Snorlax is out!" Tabitha cried, just about catching Blake's attention over the rising cacophony of splintering wood, tortured metal and a quantum resonator going critical.

"Confound that false beard!" Cheren shrieked. He could clearly see Snorlax hurtling down the sloping ground on her jury-rigged skateboard, flat on her expansive belly, with the false beard very much still in place. He and Tabitha both knew this had been a possibility, but it had seemed so distant, so slim a chance...

"We've got to stop her," said Tabitha urgently. "There is no question of failing! Pok  mon rangers, advance!"

"Lucha hawl!" agreed Hawlucha.

"Cario!" Lucario agreed.

"Palpi palpitoad!" Palpitoad-B added.

"Toad palpi!" suggested Palpitoad-B.

"Then let's g-"

Cheren lay an urgent hand on Tabitha's shoulder. "Don't. There are better ways, and I've just come up with one!"

"...You have?" said Tabitha dubiously.

"Of course I have! I swore on my honour as a son of the Clan McTavish to see this through, and through I shall see it! After all my entourage of pok  mon and I have been through together, I can think of nothing we cannot-"

"\_HURRY UP!\_" wailed Snorlax, plummeting still further down the side of the valley.

"Right," said Cheren, his attention snapping right back to her. "Serperior, I choose you! Use vine whip, then strength!"

Serperior knew what Cheren had in mind as soon as she materialised, sending her best vines lashing out to curl around Snorlax's feet. They snapped taut, jolting Serperior harder than anything she'd faced in battle, but she stood firm, letting every bit of energy within her come to the fore. Planting her tail in the ground, Serperior heaved with all her might.

"We can't let Serperior do this alone. Come forth! Unfezant, fly down and see if you can lift Snorlax!" Cheren ordered, letting out his other four pok  mon. With fierce determination, Sawk, Herdier, Cinccino and Cheren took hold of Servine's vine and heaved, Unfezant flying down ahead to do his bit. And that "heaved" is certainly worthy of italics.

"My word..." Blake breathed, staring in amazement at the scene unfolding before him.

"Cheren's grown up!" Bianca commented.

"There's no way those pok  mon would try so hard for a different trainer, unless Snorlax was a close friend anyway," said Stacey, impressed.

"You know, I really feel we've misjudged him," Whitney agreed.

"What are you all standing around here for?! Give them a hand!" snapped Tabitha, rushing over to Cheren. She grabbed him by the waist and added her own strength to the pull.

"\_No snorlaxes will fall to their dooms and squash abandoned pok  mon shelters and orphanages on my watch,\_" Lucario agreed, hauling on Servine's tail with all his might.

Nothing, not even the action of gravity on a snorlax's mass, is as powerful as the selfless, united effort of humans and pok  mon, and so Snorlax began to reverse up the sloping side of the valley. "Lax!" Snorlax lax!" she shouted encouragingly, doing her best to push herself along. "Snor snorlax!"

"Glad... to... hear... it!" Cheren agreed, barely able to speak above the protests of his muscles.

"I'll take over for you a bit, Cheren," Whitney offered, moving over to him.

"Y're an angel!" Cheren gasped, passing the vine into her hands and collapsing to the ground, completely exhausted.

"The power of Aura is with us!" Whitney said optimistically,

"Serperior," he said calmly, "Sawk, Herdier, Unfezant, Cinccino,



forepaws, hurled a water pulse at the ferroseed. It hit head-on, yet he barely blinked.

"Truly well-protected..." Blake commented. "If that's how it is, use megahorn!"

Now that she was a samurott, Samantha was gifted with one of the finest horns of all pok  mon, and she put it to good use, cleaving down on the ferroseed as if her head was an axe. The ferroseed shut his eyes and endured the clobber in silence, leaving Samantha to reel back in agony, clutching at her mangled horn.

Blake's eyes widened in horror. "Samantha! Oh, Arceus, your horn!"

"\_Way to state the obvious,\_" said Samantha grumpily, retrieving a bandage from under her armour. "\_Be a dear and wrap this around me, would you?\_"

Blake carefully bandaged Samantha's horn, reflecting as he did so that this was hardly an ideal capture. The ferroseed was busy using iron defence and ingrain, making himself almost invincible; perhaps Blake had set his heights a bit too high.

As if sensing this thought, Samantha gave Blake an encouraging look. "\_There's bound to be a way, Blake. As long as it doesn't involve me using my horn, I'm game for anything!\_"

"In which case..." said Blake, hoping that talking would help any ideas lurking around his brain to emerge, "it might be an idea... to... use shell blade on that massive stalactite!"

Samantha leapt up to the ceiling of the cave, unsheathing her seamitars (evolved forms of scalchops) and cutting the stalactite loose in one swift, flowing motion. The ferroseed, so thoroughly ingrained, could only look on in terror as the stalactite fell on him, smashing to pieces as it touched his spikes. Blake and Samantha were showered with shards of limestone, and when the dust cleared, the ferroseed was unconscious.

Blake did a little dance of triumph, then retrieved a pok  -ball and gently touched it against the ferroseed's least spiky area. It sucked him in and wobbled for a bit, then let off a shower of sparks.

"\_Not a bad capture, really,\_" said Samantha appreciatively.

"Too right! Literally no-one can slice through a stalactite like you can. Um, he said his name was Carlos, didn't he?" said Blake.

"\_I believe so,\_" agreed Samantha.

"Then it's settled," said Blake. He clipped Carlos's pok  -ball to his belt and retrieved Samantha's. "You'd better rest your horn for a bit. Return, Samantha."

Samantha returned, and Blake replaced her pok  -ball on his belt, glad as always to feel her familiar aura next to his hip. There were seven distinct auras, now; Carlos's felt unfamiliar, but they would get used to each other soon enough. Blake couldn't wait to get to know him better. A Spanish ferroseed was just the thing to add a



little diversity.

\* \* \*

><p>"Whitney's log, Friday the twenty-ninth of June: As soon as Blake returns from his ferroseed expedition, we'll be off to Mistralton City. I can hardly wait! I'm a Mistralton girl myself, y'know. It'll be nice to see Mum and Dad again, and Nigel, if he's still around," said Whitney, writing in one of her many sketchbooks as she spoke. An observant viewer would be able to see a simple, yet charming picture of Mistralton City on the opposite page.<p>

"You too?!" cried Blake, emerging into the wide, airy cavern from the side cave he'd been exploring. "Logs must be catching."

"Stacey hasn't done any yet," Whitney pointed out.

"I don't really see the point, to be honest," explained Stacey. "I've got memories, and those are what matter."

"A fine sentiment," said Cheren approvingly. "Now, if there's no further business--"

"As I recall, on the first day of my journey, I had only just turned ten. My weedle and I were so young and naive, we could never tell when Team Rocket agents were dressing up as innocent people, even though the same two idiots spent years following us. I left my hometown, Littleroot Town, at approximately 10:34 post meridian, then--"

As Stacey rambled on, Cheren, Bianca, Blake and Durant decided unanimously to ignore her, while Whitney listened adoringly to every word, lending her own insights to the particularly interesting bits. And so, with Durant's natural instincts to lead the way, the Magnificent Many trekked through the veritable labyrinth of magnetic stones to Mistralton City.

\* \* \*

><p>"Cheren! Bianca! Blake! Whitney! Durant! Orange-haired girl! I was wondering when you'd get here," Professor Juniper (the second) called, rushing over to the Magnificent Many. They were just inside the gates of Mistralton City, flanked by airport runways on the left and rice fields on the right. "How are the pokÃ©dexes coming along?"<p>

"Quite well. We've recorded more than a hundred species," Cheren informed her.

"And we helped get rid of a bad gym leader," Bianca added.

"Not to mention dealing with the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation at every turn," Blake supplemented.

"I'm the Heroine of Ideals now, actually, and Blake's the Hero of Truth," Whitney pointed out.

"Orange-haired girl?" I happen to be called Stacey," said Stacey coldly.

"Fair enough," said Aurea. "I take it you'll be challenging Skyla while you're here?"

"Probably," replied Cheren.

"Good!" Aurea waited to see if any more was coming, then, seeing that it probably wasn't, took matters into her own hands. "While I've got your attention, tell me absolutely everything about N, Melissa, Ghetsis, the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, Chargestone Cave, any snorlaxes you've seen lately..."

"It's a long story," said Cheren. "Perhaps my logs might be sufficient."

"That'd be a good start," Aurea accepted.

Bianca gave Whitney a nudge. "Is he serious?" she whispered.

Cheren cleared his throat. "Cheren's log, Wednesday the twentieth of June: The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation are attacking the city. Blake is under the bed. I am having a bad day."

Aurea gave Blake a querying look. He ignored it, instead focusing squarely on Cheren.

"Cheren's log, supplemental: Blake's out. We're off," Cheren went on. "Cheren's log, also supplemental: It's all gone a bit strange, to be honest. First, N was the dread king of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, and Melissa his right-hand mauler. Ghetsis was a high priest, or something. Then it turned out Ghetsis was a narcissist, N and Melissa weren't entirely happy with extremism, and Ghetsis was also evil. He has a few allies in the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, and now the organisation has split in twain. Ghetsis has fled, we have vanquished his shadow legendary pokÃ©mon, and Blake is unconscious."

"You remembered all that?!" cried Bianca.

"I never realised!" Blake agreed. "All this time you could've remembered our birthdays, but no..."

"Why couldn't you put in a bit about me meeting Rashimo?" asked Whitney.

"Er... time constraints," said Cheren. "Anyway. Cheren's log, Wednesday the twenty-seventh of June: Blake and Whitney's Aura powers are coming along in leaps and bounds, Stacey and Bianca have both had a haircut, and I myself am trying-"

"Cheren, this isn't really getting us anywhere. Couldn't you maybe... be selective? You know, remember the parts of your logs which are actually relevant?" suggested Aurea, looking a little fed-up.

Cheren blinked. "Well... all right." He thought for a moment. "Cheren's log, supplemental: It turns out that there is a snorlax blocking the cave, and... actually, this isn't P.L.A.S.M.A stuff either."

"No, keep going!" said Aurea urgently.

"All right. It turns out that there is a snorlax blocking the cave,

and we have teamed up with a group of pokÃ©mon rangers to remove her. I am remaining here to plan, while the others have left to retrieve some digging equipment. Cheren's log, also supplemental: I think I must've hit my head somewhere. Seriously, I feel more engaged now than ever before. If Alder could see me now, he'd... actually, I can skip some of this stuff, I think."

"If you like," said Aurea.

Cheren nodded. "Cheren's log, yet more supplemental: In spite of some complications, Snorlax is free, leading to what we in the trade refer to as a "crowning moment of awesome". She is coming with me on my journey. Cheren's log, Thursday the eighteenth of June: Following further investigation, we have discovered that Snorlax was roped to a large stalagmite. How we managed to miss the rope is beyond me. In any case, Tabitha and I have shared a tearful farewell, and my friends and I are going to explore the cave in great detail."

"That's all there is about Snorlax?" asked Aurea.

"Indeed," Cheren confirmed. "You can talk to her, if you like."

"Really?! Well, that'd be great," Aurea agreed.

"Very well, then. Stand back, please," said Cheren, retrieving Snorlax's pokÃ©-ball. Everyone took a few steps back. "Snorlax, I choose you!"

With a flash of light, Snorlax burst into the air, causing a minor earthquake as she thudded to the ground. "Lax! Snorlax snor lax snor!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Snorlax. I'm Professor Juniper," Aurea greeted her, a little shakily. "Can you tell me what happened to you, leading to you being stuck in the entrance to Chargestone Cave?"

"\_Sure. Humans in raincoats drag me away an' shove me in cave. One of dem have green hair an' diadem. Dey wedge me in hole in cliff an' wrap fang round my tummy, den put other end round somefang. Me too heavy for fang, so fang break after coupla' days after reachin' elastic limit due to de effect of gravity upon my mass. Me go flying an' dis human save me. Me like him. Not like raincoats,\_" Snorlax explained, gesturing to Cheren. "\_Me want have battles to work up appetite,\_" she added, by way of explanation.

"Oh, I think I understand," said Aurea thoughtfully. "Ghetsis split away from the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation with a minority group of followers, and used the snorlax to cover his tracks."

"He mentioned something about taking over the world," said Bianca.

"I see... Well, we should probably find him, then. And we'll also need to keep in touch with the less evil elements of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. And then... you're the Heroes of Truth and Ideals, right?" asked Aurea.

"We are," Whitney confirmed.

"We are," Blake agreed.

"Great! You'd better awaken Zekrom and Reshiram, then."

Blake turned pale. "Er... that won't be easy."

"Too right. Rashimo might still want to work with me, but..." said Whitney worriedly.

"...But what? What is it?!" Aurea demanded.

"It's another long story," Stacey piped up.

Professor Juniper groaned. "Oh, just fantastic. It's all long stories with you, isn't it? Well, I suppose we'd better find somewhere to sit down..."

\* \* \*

><p>"So, we've organised three separate rallies to get more pokÃ©mon in government... Rood, Bronius and Ryoko are leading those, right?"<p>

"Right," the purple-haired messenger, pilot, dental practitioner and champion swimmer Debbie confirmed. "And there's a meeting in Nimbasa City the day after tomorrow to discuss what to do about the rowdy pokÃ©mon on Victory Road. What're your plans for that?"

"Simple: make sure the pokÃ©mon from Victory Road get a say. It's about time I made things up with Fraxure, actually. We'll gatecrash the meeting if necessary," Natural Gropius Harmonia replied. "I'll go in person. Remind me to ask Melissa if she wants to come, won't you?"

"Of course. They have actually invited a pokÃ©mon to the meeting, by the way. Herschel the zebstrika. He's a community leader in those parts," Debbie pointed out.

"\_One\_ pokÃ©mon," the P.L.A.S.M.A king pointed out. "And, what... four humans? Five?"

"Six," Debbie replied.

"It's outrageous! Humans have no right to dictate how pokÃ©mon-related issues should be dealt with! I mean, sure, we can advise them, take responsibility for liberation, but..." N sighed the sigh of a revolutionary leader who's just found out that his father is actually evil, then realised how uncertain his ideals truly are. "Can't people just think about it? I mean, try to do what's right, as opposed to what's always been thought of as right, but... ain't?"

"Search me," said Debbie, with a shrug.

N shot her a very searching look. "You're a pilot, messenger, swimmer and dentist, and who knows what else. I'll bet you could weigh in on this stuff if you wanted."

Debbie looked back at N, completely blank. "I thought it was "wade in"."

"It could be either," N replied. "Seriously, though, I don't buy this "plain and simple Debbie" act. You're more than just a pilot, dentist, swimmer and messenger, and I intend to find out what secrets you hide."

Debbie shrugged good-naturedly. "You're the boss."

\* \* \*

><p>None of the Magnificent Many had ever seen Professor Juniper looking quite as miserable as she did now. "So... what you're saying is there's absolutely no chance of you, Zephyr and Rashimo working together."<p>

"Yes. We're saying that," Whitney confirmed, balancing her assertiveness with not wanting to make the professor even more miserable.

"You realise the world might fall into ruin without the Heroes of Truth and Ideals, don't you?" Aurea persisted. "I mean, sure, you deserve to choose your own destinies, but... aren't the destinies you have in mind now a bit selfish?"

"No. We'll be glad to save the world if we need to, but... not with them," Blake elaborated.

"What if Zephyr improves her attitude? Rashimo wouldn't side with her against you, and you could work together!" said Aurea hopefully.

Blake looked at Whitney.

Whitney looked at Cheren. "Any thoughts?"

"Alas, none," Cheren replied. "Except perhaps... well... I've improved a bit lately in the sociability department, and-"

Blake's eyes widened. "He's right." He and Whitney looked at each other again, this time glowing with the light of a newfound epiphany. "If Cheren can improve, anyone can! And I'll get to use those speeches I was practicing on Zephâ€| um, forget that last bit."

"Er..." said Cheren.

"We'll find Zephyr and Rashimo, talk things over... we'll stop the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation for sure with them!" Whitney grinned. "Cheren, you're a genius!"

"But... all I said was-"

"Let's go, let's go!" Bianca interrupted, taking Cheren firmly by the hand and all but dragging him off.

"Right behind you!" Blake and Whitney agreed, rushing off after them, closely followed by Durant.

Stacey gave the shellshocked Aurea an apologetic smile. "We're pok mon trainers. This sort of thing happens."

"Er... I'm glad," said Aurea shakily.

"Bye-ee!" Stacey called, before rushing off after the rest of the Many.

\* \* \*

><p>"Yoo-hoo! Zephyr!" Bianca called, her cry echoing around Chargestone Cave, where she thought Zephyr might be enjoying the electrical discharges.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"Rashimo, are you here?!" shouted Cheren, treading carefully around the dormant crater at the top of Twist Mountain.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"Are you there?!" cried Blake above the din of Castelia City's traffic.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"Are you anywhere?!" Whitney insisted, hoping the sound wouldn't get too distorted by all the trees of Pinwheel Forest.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"We wish to call a truce!" Stacey howled at exactly 116.728 decibels.<p>

"Pipe down! You'll wake Caitlin up!" Marshall admonished her.

"Sorry. I've never been to the pok mon league headquarters before, so..." said Stacey, looking ashamed.

\* \* \*

><p>"Can we make this the last trip? Teleporting really takes it out of me," said Claribelle plaintively. "We've been all across Unova at least twice, and even Sigilyph's feeling it."<p>

"All right," Bianca agreed, taking one last look around Undella Bay. "I guess we'll find those two when we find them..."

\* \* \*

><p>The following afternoon, Whitney, Blake, Cheren, Bianca, Stacey and Durant were gathered around a large caf  table, discussing yesterday's efforts. Well, most of them were; Bianca was rather more invested in giving Claribelle a brain massage.<p>

"I believe I know what went wrong," said Cheren assertively. "As I recall, Bianca, Whitney and Blake became overwhelmed by their own enthusiasm, rushing off without a care in the world to seek Zephyr. We had no plan," he went on, raising a hand to ward off any

inevitable interruptions, "nor any intel on Zephyr and Rashimo's locations. I do not, of course, wish to place blame-

"That'll be the day," said Whitney, ignoring his raised hand.

"-but today is a new day, and we can do better."

"How, exactly?" asked Blake.

"My dear boy, it's as simple as anything!" declared Cheren theatrically. "We put out a classified ad!"

The silence following that remark was so deafening Blake's eardrums felt they might curl up into little balls and bounce away to start a new life as footballs for very small pok mon, where silences would never trouble them again. As for everyone else's eardrums, I leave that to your imagination.

"...A classified ad," said Whitney, completely deadpan, after what felt like an eternity. "You... are suggesting... that we do... a classified... advertisement."

"Indeed," Cheren confirmed.

"In a newspaper," Whitney went on.

"Naturally," said Cheren proudly.

"A newspaper being an implement which you can only use if you have hands," Whitney went on, "and can read and understand Japanese."

"Er..." said Cheren, a red tint blossoming on his cheeks.

"LEGENDARY POK MON DON'T READ NEWSPAPERS!" roared Whitney.

"Not to say it'd be a bad idea if we knew Zephyr and Rashimo did read newspapers," said Blake meaningfully.

Whitney shot him a dirty look. "Oh, sure, steal my thunder. Do you realise how dense Cheren's being?!"

"I realise, but you're being unqualifiably angry!" Blake retorted.

"I have a right to not be calm and logical all the time, Blake," Whitney pointed out coldly.

"I know, I know... you're just being... all right, perhaps I was a bit... look, I respect you as... a ginger girl with freckles, and... a strategist?" Blake cleared his throat. "What I mean is, I respect you as..." What was her most outstanding feature? "A tomboy. Um."

"Well... thank you, Blake. I respect you as a boy who doesn't embody traditionally masculine ideals all the time, too," said Whitney, a little mollified. "But really, if you respect me for being a tomboy, you've gotta take the rough with the smooth."

"What was said needed saying," Stacey interjected, trying to make

sure things stayed civil. "Then again, so did the other thing the other one of you said as a counter to what the first of you said."

Whitney looked at Blake. "...Which one of us is she talking to?"

"The one named after a colour and an element, silly!" Bianca giggled.

Blake Stormheart considered Whitney Blazeheart. "Bianca... that wasn't helpful."

"I know," said Bianca modestly.

Cheren breathed a deep, heartfelt sigh, seeing all the old annoyances flooding right back. "Gentlemen, please, we're-

"Choose your words!" shouted Bianca, Stacey, Whitney and Claribelle.

"Words which aren't just 'gentlemen'," Blake advised Cheren.

"Er... people, we're getting somewhat off-topic here," Cheren corrected himself. "To wit: Zephyr and Rashimo. Classified ads. Discuss."

Blake inspected his fingernails. Bianca checked her pocket sundial. Whitney twiddled her thumbs. Stacey ran her fingers lovingly through Whitney's completely non-silky, mottled ginger hair. Durant sharpened his mandibles. Claribelle thought about designing a pocket grandfather clock.

"Oh, for-! Fine. Don't discuss. I couldn't care less," said Cheren, making a laudable effort not to care less. "But really, if we're ever to meet up with those two again-

"Which two?" asked Rashimo, stepping over to the table, followed by Zephyr.

There was a moment's awkward silence, broken only by Bianca bravely stating the obvious.

"You two," the incredibly cheerful girl clarified. "The avatars of some other two, I mean. You and her and him and you and she and they and them and-

"And Uncle Tom Cobbley and all and all. We know, you subatomic-minded virago," said Zephyr heavily. She didn't quite know what a virago was, but it sounded like a good insult. "If you think you can just demand our forgiveness in the middle of nowhere, after all you said to us-

"Demand?! What did we demand?" demanded Blake.

"And who mentioned forgiveness?" Whitney agreed.

"We're not in the middle of nowhere either," Cheren pointed out.



"And as to what we supposedly said to \_you\_â€|" Bianca spat, "there can be only one reasonable response." She burst into tears, falling to her knees before the two legendary avatars. "I'm so, so, \_so\_ sorry! I never meant to be mean to you or insult you or anything and I'll never do it again and I'm a horrible person and I hate myself! Forgive me, please!"

Completely deflated, Bianca flopped down onto the floor, throwing her arms around Rashimo's feet.

"Uhâ€|" said Rashimo, caught rather off-balance.

"Pathetic," Zephyr commented.

"Bianca, you never actually did anything bad enough to need that kind of apology. None of us did," said Whitney, not too concerned, considering how easily Bianca's self-esteem rebounded.

Bianca froze in mid-repentance. "...I didn't?" Feeling rather silly, she rose to her feet once more. "I guess I forgotâ€|"

Zephyr scoffed loudly. "Do you realise how pathetic you must seem, so-called Magnificent so-called Many? If this is how you open negotiations-"

"I'd like to see you open them better," said Cheren.

"Yeah. All you seem to do lately is insult people," Blake commented. "It is completely unqualifiable that you should feel entitled to hold us perpetually in contempt for no expedient other than the fact that you're legendary and we are not!" He'd secretly been looking forward to taking Zephyr to task for quite a while.

Zephyr took this rant completely in her stride. "Been rehearsing, have you?"

"...Yes," Blake replied, trying to ignore the giggling now coming from his friends. "That doesn't change how true it is!"

"True? You dare speak of truth against me?!" cried Zephyr, looking betrayed, as if Blake had just stolen all her gym badges and become Regional Champion. "You are no hero of truth! I embody the utmost truth, greater than all other fundamentalâ€| things, and no-one who stands against me may think themselves aught but a filthy liar."

Whitney glanced over at Rashimo. "Isn't it the Heroine or Hero of Ideals who's supposed to go nuts like that? You know, thinking they have all the answers, they're always rightâ€|"

"Oh, I learnt my lesson last time," Rashimo assured her. "After that unfortunate business with the droughtâ€| Well, Zekrom an' Black saved countless lives, an' that humbled me somewh-"

"THIS IS NOT YOUR ARGUMENT, YOU IDEALIST TRUTH-HATER!" Zephyr roared, her face suddenly mere millimetres away from a terrified Rashimo.

Well, when I say terrified... "I'M stupid?! And just what d'you think the general consensus on yourself is, eh, m'darling sister?!"

"I care not what people think of me!" Zephyr countered. "What matters is that I am completely true to myself, and to my divine purpose. There is no equivocation with Zephyr, Daughter of the Storm."

"...And us disagreeing with you automatically makes us evil?" said Stacey, her tone of voice saying as much as all of Blake's finest speeches.

"Yes," replied Zephyr, completely serious. "I told you, I am the embodiment of truth."

"What about what's right, though? I mean, what you don't exactly believe in but still stands for what'sâ€ well, right. We've been fighting the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation at every turn, so we can agree on that, can't we?" argued Whitney.

"Absolutely not. If you are not with me, then you are my enemy," Zephyr explained calmly. "Do you want that, Blazeheart?"

Whitney rolled her eyes. "You're breaking my heart. Look, we can go our separate ways, but I have no intention of taking any nonsense from you. I don't really think anyone'll put up with you, actually." She looked over at her friends. "All who have no intention of taking any nonsense from Zephyr, say aye!"

"Aye!" chorused Cheren, Claribelle, Blake, Stacey and Bianca. Durant made an affirmative squeak,

Zephyr flinched, then, instantly regretting her flinch, sent sparks crackling all across the cafÃ©. "You imbeciles leave me no choice. If I cannot bring you in line with my holy work, then you must be utterly destroyed. Prepare to die!"

Blake could see where this was going, and he wasn't entirely happy about it now that the moment was coming. "Everyone who doesn't want to fight a legendary pokÃ©mon, run for it!"

"\_I'll teleport anyone who'd rather not get involved,\_" Claribelle offered.

A forest of hands, paws, wings and tentacles shot up just as Zephyr reared up on her hind feet and hurled out a shimmering wave of electricity, blasting through everything in its path. Even the ground-types felt it. Without so much as a moment's pause, the Avatar of Zekrom called up a shield of lightning around her body and charged straight into Whitney, whom she was beginning to see as her arch-enemy.

"Gaahhhh!" was Whitney's eloquent response as Zephyr smashed her into the reception desk, sending one of the braver waiters scurrying for cover. "Ugghhhh..." she added, gingerly feeling around her solar plexus. A dull, throbbing pain in her chest indicated that she had at least one broken rib.

"YOU BULLY!" Stacey bellowed, kicking Zephyr in the nose.

"By dose! By dose! Why, you biserable dittle-"

"In the name of the truth! The real one, vis a vis you being an overzealous fathead who hates everything!" Blake roared, hurling an aura sphere into Zephyr's flank as close as he dared.

"You traitorous guttersnipe!" Zephyr screamed, her rage materialising in the form of vicious bolts of lightning lancing out at Blake, Whitney and everyone.

Whitney gave by far the loudest yelp of pain. "I can't take any more!"

"We can't just give up on fighting her!" Cheren snapped, squaring himself against the raging lightning. A quick clout from his staff gave Zephyr pause for thought, and Claribelle followed up with a psywave to the face.

"Now see here! I'm not entirely chipper with you beatin' up my sister!" Rashimo protested half-heartedly.

"Oh, she won't suffer," Bianca assured him, giving Zephyr a well-aimed kick up the bum. "We're just going to give her psychological treatment."

Zephyr stared at her. "Psychological?! What in the name of Arceus are you drivelling on ab-" realisation suddenly dawned. "...Oh. That. Well, rest assured I will not go easily into the clutches of-"

Durant headbutted her clean across the room.

A few tense moments passed as the smoke around Zephyr blew gradually away, revealing the Avatar of Zekrom still standing. She looked a little worse for wear, but more electricity than ever was arcing off her mane. "You meddling brats leave me no choice. A shame, really; I almost liked some of you," she snarled. "By the power of truth! WILD CHARGE!"

Cheren's heart skipped a beat as Zephyr hurled herself at the Magnificent Many with all her might. This could be it for him. Dimly aware of Bianca throwing her arms around him in terror, Cheren did a quick mental check of his pok  mon. No good; even if he could get to his pok  balls quickly enough, not even Snorlax could stop Zephyr in her tracks.

A tear slowly but surely emerged from Cheren's eye. He had failed everyone. After all the character development he'd been through, after everything he'd done, he was still to be defeated by-

"Cheren, get a grip! We've got better things to worry about than angst!" said Whitney, through gritted teeth. "If we can just-"

"FLARE BLITZ!" roared Rashimo, coated in fire, as he charged straight at Zephyr.

"-wait for Rashimo to wake up and smell the lack of need for sibling loyalty, we'll be fine!" Whitney finished.

"EVERYONE DOWN!" suggested Blake, who had enough knowledge of physics to know what was about to happen. There was a mad scramble for cover,

then a tremendous shockwave, closely followed by a dustcloud. An uneasy silence descended over the café.

\* \* \*

><p>"'Scuse me, when do you think the uneasy silence'll lift?" whispered Bianca.<p>

"I don't know... next week? The week after? It takes a while to write these chapters," replied Cheren. "Now shut up. You're ruining the atmosphere."

\*\*To be continued...\*\*

## 23. Chapter 23: Zephyr Finally Recovers

\*\*~Chapter Twenty-three: Our Heroes Challenge Skyla and Do a Statement, but Blake Somehow Gets Left Out~\*\*

"Burn in the Distortion Realm, you self-righteous prat!" roared Rashimo, sending a wave of fire over Zephyr.

"The thunder of Arceus will exhume your limbs!" retorted Zephyr, sending several million volts through Rashimo.

"In the name of justice and stuff like that, tremble before my fire!" shouted Rashimo, calling jets of lava up out of the floor.

"The truth will never die! YOU WILL!" declared Zephyr, calling lightning down upon the building.

"Well, it's better than the uneasy silenceâ€|" Stacey commented, ducking under a blast of fire.

"Shouldn't you be doing something? I mean, you are pokÃ©mon trainersâ€|" the local Officer Jenny commented, finally turning up behind the group.

"We are considering it, rest assured," said Cheren. "It's simply a matter of waiting until-"

Rashimo thumped heavily into the wall, which, having already been through a lot, yielded easily to his limp, sparking body,

"Ohhhhâ€|" should've brought a citrus berryâ€|" Rashimo groaned, fainting dead away,

"...Until Rashimo falls." Cheren retrieved Serperior's pokÃ©-ball. "Serperior, come forth!"

Serperior burst into existence with the usual flash of light, her tail raised high and eyes shining with the joy of being about to clobber Zephyr. "Perior! Serperior!"

"I think, on balanceâ€|" Stacey threw one of her pokÃ©-balls into the air. "Flygon, I choose you!"

The slender, pale green desert dragon materialised beside Serperior, looking as if she was her slightly chubbier, non-leafy cousin.

"So you're planning on battling me!" Zephyr snarled, demonstrating a remarkable ability to state the obvious. Her fur was charred and scratched all over, and in her eyes was something suspiciously similar to the "something" in Ghetsis's eyes: hatred of everything. "You shan't succeed. My own brother tried and failed-

"He stood alone," Blake interrupted. "That was brave of him, but still not quite enough. The laws of physics clearly state that, when humans and pok mon work together for a common goal with little or no selfish intent, they literally can't fail. So we can't fail, literally!"

"Ha! Zephyr, Daughter of the Storm, sneers at the laws of physics!" Zephyr retorted. "I cannot be defeated!"

"Carlos, claps your hand if you're getting fed up of her posturing! Um, if you had hands, I mean," cried Blake, releasing his newest partner: round, spiky Carlos.

"\_Insensitive!" muttered Carlos.

"Templeton, let's go!" shouted Bianca, throwing Templeton's pok ball in midair. Templeton flashed into existence, roared at Zephyr and fell asleep.

"Durant, are you up for it?" asked Whitney,

Durant nodded,

"Brilliant! Avenge my ribcage!" said Whitney loudly.

"\_Gladly,\_" said Durant, taking his place before Zephyr.

Carefully maneuvering her Aura past her broken rib, Whitney set her hand on fire, took careful aim, and hurled forth a roaring column of flame right into Zephyr.

Zephyr rolled her eyes. "I get enough of that from Rashimo. There's no way you can-

Serperior lashed at Zephyr with long, heavy, spike-laden vines. Flygon split the earth beneath Zephyr's feet. Carlos shot a barrage of spikes into Zephyr's stripy flank. Templeton gave a deafening snore. Durant bit Zephyr's foot with all his might. Blake aura sphered Zephyr in the face. Bianca threw a banana at Zephyr. Cheren pulled Zephyr's hair. Stacey punched Zephyr in the nose.

"Aaaaaugh! Dot by dose agaid!" wailed Zephyr, by now in a real state. "Dis blows. I'b gettig out ob here."

(Translation: Aaaaaugh! Not my nose again! This blows. I'm getting out of here.)

Zephyr gave Stacey a farewell kick in the stomach and attempted to bound out through the window.

"Grab her! Quick!" ordered Cheren, throwing himself on Zephyr's legs and hanging on with all his might.

"Right behind you!" said Serperior, lassoing Zephyr's legs with her tail.

"Best thing I've heard all day! Let's see, I think I've got some zebstrika-sized handcuffs in hereâ€|" said Officer Jenny, rummaging through her pockets,

"GET YOUR PAWS OFF ME, YOU FILTHY MANKEYS!" screeched Zephyr, lashing out at Cheren and Serperior. She was much stronger than your average zebstrika, almost putting Cheren in the same boat as Whitney as she writhed and kicked and generally rebelled.

"I think there's an Aura technique just right for this situation," said Blake. "Whitney, if anything were to happen to me, you can have my shoes and Bianca gets my trousers. Here we go!"

Blake pounced on Zephyr's back, throwing his arms around her shoulders. He was instantly shaken as if Zephyr was one of those bouffalant rides they had at funfairs, but held on with all his might, forcing his head next to Zephyr.

"Allow me to reiterate: GET YOUR PAWS OFF ME!" roared Zephyr, leaping up to slam Blake against the top of the window.

"Owww... " Blake cleared his throat. "My soul to your soul. Your heart to my heart. Our minds are one, our Auras are one, there can be nothing secret from either- Aaaaaaargh!"

Blake went flying.

"Oh, golly! Blake, say something!" gasped Bianca.

"She's a bit stronger-willed than I was expecting," said Blake shakily. He retrieved Samantha's pokÃ©-ball. "I think you'll have to help me."

"\_My pleasure,\_" said Samantha, materialising beside Blake.

"We're doing an aura purge on Zephyr," Blake explained, heading over to her again. "Don't mind Cheren and Serperior; she won't hurt them too badly."

Samantha didn't look too sure.

"On the count of three," said Blake, taking Samantha by the paw. "Oneâ€| seventeenâ€| THREE!"

They pounced on Zephyr.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ah, right," said Blake sheepishly, glancing around Zephyr's subconscious. "I think I know what happened here."<p>

"\_I'll bet you do,\_" agreed Samantha, stepping absentmindedly over a rather large book, entitled "Why I Hate Everything and Want to Make the Entire Universe Suffer", by Blake Stormheart. "\_I got a bit of that when I mind-melded with you, but I'd just mega evolved, soâ€|\_"

"If I could see my own brainâ€¦" Blake sighed and shook his head. "No, no no no no. The thing here is positive thinking. Thisâ€¦ is goingâ€¦ to be the best aura purge in history. I'm so psyched I could explode! We'll make Zephyr stop being crazy, just you wait and see. I know we can do it!"

"\_Yaaay! Let's do it!\_" agreed Samantha, with just a dash of sarcasm. "\_How, exactly?\_"

"Simple!" said Blake. "The first step is toâ€¦ umâ€¦" This would not be a good time to stop being confident. "Make it up as we go along! I am the truth, the whole truth and nothing but- actually, no, that's just nutcasiness. Wellâ€¦ we'll do our best, right?"

"\_Always,\_" Samantha agreed. She picked up the copy of Why I Hate Everything and Want to Make the Entire Universe Suffer, turning it thoughtfully around in her paws. "\_For starters, perhaps we'll get rid of this book.\_"

"Good thinking." Blake retrieved an enormous sword made of blue crystal from his pocket- this was a mental landscape, so anything could happen- and cut the book in half. "Nowâ€¦ what next?"

\* \* \*

><p>"I can't believe how long Blake and Samantha've been standing there..." said Bianca, eyes wide with concern, watching over the completely still figures of Blake and Samantha. Their hands rested gently on Zephyr's head, but some experimental prodding from Bianca found them impossible to remove. Zephyr herself was in a fitful sleep, sweating profusely and occasionally sending out a shower of sparks.<p>

"They'll be fine," Cheren reassured her. "Blake has a tendency to not fail miserably, and Samantha is practically invincible."

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Well, that was a miserable failure,<em>" Samantha commented dryly, as she and Blake trudged back to the pokÃ©mon centre, following a sound thrashing at the Temple of Generic Evil Cultists. (Zephyr's mind was quite expansive.)

"Well, we were outnumbered three to two," said Blake. "Let's seeâ€¦ perhaps I can bring the others here to helpâ€¦"

"\_I wouldn't count on it. PokÃ©-balls don't really operate on the psychic plane, and-\_"

Lilly, Patrick, Darkblade, Georgina and Darren materialised beside the two friends with a gentle pop. Carlos was beside them in spirit.

"\_...Oh, right. Aura guardian who learns suspiciously quickly,\_" Samantha reminded herself.

\* \* \*

><p>Cheren had been watching over Blake, Zephyr and Samantha for some time now.<p>

"Cheren, aren't you coming to bed soon?" asked Whitney, tapping him on the shoulder. "I mean, you've been watching them all dayâ€|"

There was no response.

"Cheren, it's all right, really," said Whitney gently. "I know you're ashamed of being a snooty-pants, and you want your friends to be all right, but there's nothing you can do! Soâ€| stop wasting your time and do something useful." That last bit was more for her own benefit than Cheren's.

"Leave him be, Whitney. He can't hear you," said Stacey, arriving behind Whitney.

"Wellâ€| why on Earth not?!" cried Whitney.

"Zzzzzzzâ€|" snored Cheren.

Whitney's mouth dropped open, looking momentarily as if it might hit the floor.

"I told you," said Stacey, giving Whitney an apologetic smile.

"He-he's been asleep all this time! All those words we had to look up when we were giving the police that statementâ€| and him, with his vocabularyâ€| snoozing!" Whitney spat.

"Well, it's only about 42.387% as nice as his average behaviour," Stacey conceded. "He can wait 'till morning, though. Come along. I still haven't kissed every one of your freckles yetâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>"This has gone on long enough," said Blake grimly, addressing the pokÃ©mon gathered around his campfire. "Zephyr's mind is one of the craziest places we've been, but we can get through it, believe me. And we will. You see that tower over there?!"<p>

Blake's pokÃ©mon glanced over at the tall, spiky tower next to Zephyr's memory centres, confirming by-and-by that they did, indeed, see it.

"Good. That's Zephyr's amygdala, the part of her brain whereâ€| amygdala-y stuff happens. Or something. Anyway, that's where the full force of my own unhappiness hit her; kicking me in the head must've triggered something inside her. We're going to untrigger it. Any questions?"

Patrick raised a paw. "\_Do we get a tea break?\_"

"...Let's just go," Blake decided.

\* \* \*

><p>After about four days, Claribelle and Sigilyph had worked out a way of safely teleporting Blake, Samantha and Zephyr to the pokÃ©mon centre. Attempts to wake them up still hadn't been successful, which



was a worry, since they'd need to eat soon.<p>

"I can't help but feel kind of responsible, you know?" Professor Juniper the Younger commented, looking despondently over the unconscious three. "I mean, I gave Samantha to Blake—we all knew there'd be dangers involved, but—"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Professor," Nurse Joy assured her. "Pokémon and humans benefit immeasurably from each other's company. Didn't you tell me Samantha used to try and beat up anything less than twice her size?"

"True—we had an influence on her, no doubt." Aurea sighed. "What I mean is... me pressuring him, I guess. I guilt-tripped the children into finding Zephyr and Rashimo again, and this has happened."

Nurse Joy said nothing. This led to a few minutes of silence, which looked on course to be an hour of silence before the door opened.

"Nurse Joy! Professor! Guess what!" cried Bianca.

"You beat Skyla?" Aurea guessed.

"What? No, that's not it! Well, I guess we did, but anyway, we had ice cream!" declared Bianca.

"We four are now proud holders of the jet badge!" said Whitney proudly, ignoring Bianca.

"When Blake gets one, we'll have five gym badges apiece," Cheren agreed.

"Brilliant! You're more than halfway to being relatively good pokémon trainers now," said Aurea proudly. "If you get eight badges each, you'll be eligible to enter the annual pokémon league tournaments, with a chance of becoming League Champion. Also, anyone who makes it to the semi-finals or better gets to challenge the Elite Four, and either take the place of one of them, or, after defeating all four, challenge the Regional Champion!"

"Er—that was brilliant exposition, but we're missing what really matters here," said Bianca, trying to be tactful. "I had a flake and Whitney and Stacey both had waffle cones and Cheren had chocolate sauce and we got Durant some nougat and—"

"Bianca, you are the one who is missing the point!" snapped Cheren.

"...Oh, right. Samantha and Zephyr and Blake and—yeah," said Bianca sheepishly. "We should've got them some ice cream too, shouldn't we?"

\* \* \*

><p>"In the name of the truth, take this, amygdala!" shouted Blake, kicking Zephyr's amygdala in what appeared to be its most vulnerable place.<p>

"\_I concur!\_" said Samantha, giving Zephyr's amygdala a hydro pump up the jacksy.

"\_Giga impact comin' atcha!\_" declared Lilly, slamming into the amygdala with all her might.

"\_Can it be confused, do you think?\_" asked Patrick, giving the amygdala a shot of confuse ray.

"\_I love you so much! You're the must huggable amygdala in the world!\_" said Darkblade, head-over-heels in love, giving Zephyr's amygdala a cuddle.

"\_Get a grip, Darkblade...\_" sighed Georgina, hurling a barrage of stones at the amygdala.

"\_They do not like it up 'em, chaps!\_" said Darren, punching the amygdala with a flaming fist.

"\_And now, the grand finale! Pin missile!\_" shouted Carlos, pelting the amygdala with a hail of his finest spikes.

"Quite a good aura purge, all things considered," said Blake proudly, as the group started to fade out of Zephyr's brain.

\* \* \*

><p>It was about three ante meridian in the morning when Blake, Samantha and Zephyr finally began to stir.<p>

"Oh, my gosh! Finally!" cried Stacey, leaping to her feet. She shook Whitney awake, more excited than she'd been in two days. "Whitney, they're waking up!"

"Ugh... who? What?" asked Whitney groggily.

"Samantha and Zephyr and Blake are awakening, Whitney! Look!" Stacey insisted.

Whitney rose into a sitting position, looked, and was instantly awake. "They are!"

Blake was yawning and rubbing his eyes, Samantha was quickly checking Zephyr for any signs of craziness and Zephyr was complaining of a severe headache. They all looked fine.

After some spirited awakenings, courtesy of Whitney and Stacey, the rest of the Magnificent Many were soon very much awake, asking Blake and Samantha all sorts of questions about being in someone else's mind and telling Zephyr, in no uncertain terms, to mind her Ps and Qs.

\* \* \*

><p>"I shall mind whatever letters I please..." Zephyr muttered, tucking into the mashed potatoes Bianca had prepared so she, Blake and all the pokÃ©mon could get their strength back. "Still, it's good to have all that hatred out of my head. Know what I mean?"<p>

"We know what you mean, Zephyr!" everyone shouted.

"Still, it's good when you have character development, isn't it? The ability to lose any severe flaws which previously annoyed people..." Cheren sighed fondly. "Take me, for example. I'm now a brilliant leader, a good friend-

"Slightly less of a snooty-pants," Whitney cut in, prompting Bianca to laugh like a drain.

Cheren stiffened. "\_Slightly\_ less? Are you implying, dear Whitney, that I am still unpleasant company?"

"Well, a bit..." Whitney replied. "I mean, not much. It was a joke."

"Oh, was it indeed?" said Cheren heavily.

"Er... yes. Well, of course it was! The situation called for it, didn't it?"

Incandescent with rage, Cheren retrieved the Master Spade from his bag. "This spade, Whitney... you are aware of what it can do to human flesh, yes? Even though, after aeons living alongside pokémon, we humans have developed a resilience beyond compare, if I were to dig you with this spade... your rib would be the least of your worries."

"It's already healed, Cheren," said Whitney, not once taking her eyes off Cheren as she rose to her feet, steelifying her hands with her Aura. "I do not intend to sustain any more damage."

"You made that idiotic joke, did you not? Well, I ask you... truly, in your heart, was it actually a joke?" snarled Cheren.

"YES!" snapped Whitney.

"So's this!" laughed Cheren, flopping back into his seat. "Obviously, I would never suffer such a loss of temper over one remark. It wasn't all that offensive, even, and... why aren't you laughing?"

Cheren looked as if he might sink under the table, if the glares he was receiving didn't vaporise him there and then.

"Poor taste, that man," sniffed Zephyr. "The Master Spade has no ability to harm living tissue."

## 24. Chapter 24: Skyla Flies High

\*\*~Chapter Twenty-four: It's the Last Chapter of the Year! That Makes Two Chapters per Month, on Average, In Case you're Curious~\*\*

\*\*~Author's Note~\*\*

The Weasley family are the intellectual property of J.K. Rowling. She is also a popular author on the Pokémon universe, hence why Whitney knows about them. I very much doubt I shall be sued over this stuff.

In any case, on with the story!

"Community service?" In spite of her newfound lack of murderousness, Zephyr managed to convey all the hatred in the universe in those two words. "Community service?! Legendary pok  mon do not do community service! I will not degrade myself by attempting to make recompense for one moment of insanity."

"Zephie, old shoe, ya did obliterate the caf  ," Rashimo pointed out.

"That was ages ago! Can't we simply draw a line under it?!" Zephyr insisted.

"It was yesterday," Rashimo pointed out. "You need to put somethin' back into society, what?"

"My mental state has been altered! I am a completely different person!" snapped Zephyr. "The Zephyr who once was is dead, and I will not be punished for her foolish actions."

"The police seem to think ya will," Rashimo insisted. "As do I, hence the ball and chain." He gestured to the cannonball chained to Zephyr's hoof.

Without a word, Zephyr flexed her ankle muscles, ripping the manacle in half as if it were made of cardboard.

"Oh, to have a different sister..." sighed Rashimo, kicking Zephyr in the head with all his might. Zephyr was sent sprawling. "Maybe this'll do it."

When Zephyr climbed unsteadily to her feet, it was clear that the kick had finally pushed her over the edge. "Ugghhhh... Rashimo, I... I'm so sorry for everything..." she groaned, hanging her head in shame. "Here. This should make it up to you."

She kicked Rashimo in the head. He went flying, giving Zephyr a withering look as he sailed through the air.

"All right, then," asked Zephyr expectantly. "What do they want me to do?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Cheren's log, Friday the sixth of July: It is definitely summer now, so Bianca's newly shortened hair will certainly be advantageous. Blake is shortly going to challenge Skyla for one of her Jet Badges, a venture in which he will almost certainly succeed, if not with the same challenges and need for superior strategies which met me. Seriously, two of my most reliable pok  mon are a grass type and a fighting type. I pulled through, though, didn't I?..."<p>

"Yes, Cheren, you did," said Whitney heavily. "You've told us more times than I care to remember."

"Three hundred and sixty-eight," said Stacey, who cared to remember.

"...Well, quite," said Cheren sheepishly.

"We should go soon, shouldn't we? We said we'd meet Blake sort of... now," Bianca pointed out.

"You're right. Onwards!" declared Cheren, striding off before Stacey could deliver any more statistics.

\* \* \*

><p>As befitted Skyla's status as one of Unova's best pilots, her gym was right next to the airport, surrounded by runways and fields of rice. The arena was little more than a chalk outline, completely open to the elements.<p>

"Ohhh, I knew I should've checked the weather forecast..." shivered Skyla. Her miniscule shorts and crop top simply wouldn't cut it. "Hold on a minute, won't you?"

Nonplussed, Blake held on a minute as Skyla changed into a pilot's jumpsuit, adding a scarf for good measure.

Stacey nudged Whitney. "She looks nothing like me."

"Agreed," whispered Whitney.

"Yeah, but do I or do I not look like Tasha Everdeen or whoever? That's the real issue here," Bianca insisted.

Cheren sighed. "You both look like yourselves. That's good enough, isn't it?"

After warming up a little, Skyla rummaged around inside her jumpsuit for a few minutes to find three pok  -balls, which she put in an external pocket. "Listen well, Blaine: our battle shall be three-on-three. Neither of us may substitute pok  mon, and I encourage your pok  mon to make full use of their speed and agility. They don't have to actually fly, but this is an open-air arena for a reason. Are you ready?"

Blake retrieved three pok  -balls of his own. "Of course, and it's actually Blake."

"Oh, right." Skyla cleared her throat. "Chocks away, Tranquill! Let's light up the skies!"

A slender, grey-and-black, yellow-beaked tranquill materialised in front of Skyla, hovering in midair.

"Darren, I choose you!" shouted Blake, releasing the strong, fiery-eyebrowed darmanitan. Darren roared out a battle cry, beating his chest with flaming fists. Tranquill stuck her tongue out at him.

"Use work up!" ordered Blake. Darren howled and beat his chest some more, this time building up some extra attack power.

"Agility!" ordered Skyla. Tranquill lit out like a rocket, resting her wings right on the edge of the wind as she careened around Darren, getting faster and faster with each passing second.

One bit of agility did not a pokémon faster than Darren make, so there was no need for too much strategy just yet. "Use fire punch!" Blake commanded.

Darren lunged at Tranquill, lashing out with a blazing fist. Just as he was about to connect, however, Tranquill was away. Barely even touching the air on the way, she zoomed behind Darren, ready for Skyla's next order.

"Razor wind!" said Skyla, with perfect timing. Tranquill hurled discs of unusually sharp wind at Darren, striking several times before he could blink.

Blake took this all in his stride. "Change of plan. Rotate on your arm and use flare blitz!"

Darren leapt into the air, lifting his feet high and landing on his hands. His fur caught fire. Pushing off with one hand, he whirled into Tranquill, flames spilling over her feathers as she fought for more height. Seizing the initiative, Darren grabbed Tranquill by the tail and swung her into the ground with all his might. Her landing heralded a colossal thump, cracks radiating out through the stone around her, and it was immediately clear that she wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

"Oh, blimey!" cried Skyla. "Tranquill, return."

Tranquill dematerialised, glad to be in her poké-ball again.

"Well," said Skyla, not entirely pleased with Darren's smug expression, "I can see I'll have to step things up a notch. Swoobat, I choose you!"

With a cry of "Bat! Swoooooobat!", a grey-and-blue pokémon flashed into existence before Skyla. His wings were wide and black, his nose was somehow heart-shaped, and his ears seemed to be fused into one structure on top of his head.

"What a pokémon..." breathed Blake. Swoobat was probably the evolved form of a woobat; after that, there was little Blake really knew about him.

"Swoobat: the courting pokémon. Types: flying and psychic. It shakes its tail vigorously when it emits ultrasonic waves strong enough to reduce concrete to rubble. Anyone who comes into contact with the ultrasonic waves emitted by a courting male experiences a positive mood shift; the sonic waves of females haven't really been studied yet, nor non-binary ones," recited Stacey.

"...Well, quite," said Cheren.

Skyla's "no substitutions" rule didn't seem too bad at present. Darren looked as if he could take on a whole flock of swoobats. "Use power-up punch!" ordered Blake.

"Since when-?!" Skyla's cry of astonishment was lost in the subsequent noise of Darren clobbering Swoobat. Given his type advantage, Swoobat barely flinched.

"Follow it up with flame charge!" Blake went on, punching the air to emphasise his point. Darren took a few steps back, set himself alight once more and charged Swoobat at top speed, getting faster with every bound.

"Psychic, straight upwards!" retorted Skyla. Looking strangely calm for somebody about to be collided with by a charging darmanitan, Swoobat sent his Aura flooding into Darren and lifted him off his feet. Darren thrashed madly in the grip of Swoobat's psychic powers, his own blazing Aura spilling out across the battlefield and pushing Swoobat's Aura back. There were a few tense moments, then Darren plummeted to the ground. Blake cringed.

"While he's there, air slash!" ordered Skyla. Looking triumphant, Swoobat gathered some air around his wings and slashed at Darren, which somehow made blades of air fly towards him. But Darren was far from immobile.

"Flare blitz, once more!" ordered Blake, and, in the seconds before the air slashes struck home, Darren flared up anew. He leapt at Swoobat, smashing through the blades of air to hit the bat right in his furry belly.

"\_This is the only way to battle, by jingo!\_" Darren laughed, grabbing Swoobat firmly by the tail and smashing him into the ground, right next to Tranquill's crater. Darren landed elegantly beside Swoobat, a fire punch at the ready just in case.

"Sorry, Swoobat. When I said "step it up a notch", I meant more notches," said Skyla sheepishly, recalling Swoobat. She retrieved a third pok  -ball, this one slightly worn by many years of use. The pok  mon within was practically part of the family. "Swanna, take to the skies!"

\* \* \*

><p>Zephyr had a great deal of pride. Some would say she was an arrogant blowhard, but... so what? Some of her best friends were arrogant blowhards; Tornadus was the foremost example. In any case, after helping Blake lug several barrels of water to the Desert Resort, Zephyr had sworn that she would never again let herself be used for manual labour. Fat chance.<p>

"Arceus, this is a drag..." Zephyr groaned, as her wagon train jolted over a rut left by some overenthusiastic drillburs. "Can't they just helicopter the cucumber in or build proper roads?"

"It'd be dishonourable, Zephie," replied Rashimo. "Besides, who wants hulkin' great machines all over the Entralink?"

"It's obscene!" Zephyr went on, ignoring Rashimo. "How can an interdimensional hub thingy even need so much cucumber?!"

"It's \_quantum\_ cucumber, old shoe. Best thing there is," said Rashimo patiently.

Zephyr rolled her eyes. "They could at least pull their weight a bit. YOU HEAR THAT?! I'M TALKING TO YOU, YOU LAZY PLONKERS! I AM NOT YOUR CART MONKEY!"

One of the workers sitting on the front wagon shifted nervously. "Er... this is generally a joke we play on new people, actually. You looked like you were having fun, though, so-"

"FUN?!" roared Zephyr. "I AM NOT ENJOYING THIS ONE BIT! Get... down... and... pull."

With varying degrees reluctance and much sighing and muttering of "good while it lasted", the wagon operators clambered down from their perches and set about pulling the caravan.

Zephyr smiled. "That's more like it. Ahead, full trudge!"

\* \* \*

><p>"A water type..." muttered Blake, suddenly feeling like the atmosphere was pressing down on him. (It was, technically, but... you know...) "We can take him. Darren, rollout!"<p>

"Manitan!" agreed Darren, curling himself up into a ball. His flesh hardened, turning brown and craggy, and he hurled himself at his graceful, swannish enemy.

"Bubblebeam!" commanded Skyla. Swanna breathed out a stream of bubbles, striking Darren head-on. Darren collided with Swanna rather more soggly than he was planning.

"Thrash!" ordered Blake. Never one to slow down after an attack, Darren was right back on his feet, pounding Swanna with everything he had. In considerable pain, Swanna beat his wings a few times to gain some height, leaving Darren to thrash helplessly in his wake.

"Good thinking, Swanna. Now, aqua ring!" ordered Skyla. Swanna's eyes flashed blue as he called up a ring of water, whirling around his body.

"Jump up and keep thrashing. He won't last a moment!" said Blake confidently. Darren nodded gruffly and leapt at Swanna, bashing him all over and sending splashes of aqua ring all over the place.. There was no way any swanna could survive that.

"Hydro pump!" ordered Skyla.

"...Oh," said Blake, as Darren fell limply to the ground, sopping wet and utterly bushed. "Well, you were great while you lasted. Barring type advantages, the fire of Darren is unquenchable!"

Blake recalled Darren, then retrieved Lilly's pokÃ©-ball. "Lilly, I choose you!"

With the flash of light we are surely all expecting by now, Lilly materialised before Blake, jumping for joy at the prospect of fighting a swanna. Now that she'd evolved into a stoutland, her fur was thicker, her teeth were sharper and her ability to fight effectively was better than ever.

"Use crunch!" ordered Blake. Lilly pounced on Swanna and bit down savagely on his feathery belly, eliciting a squawk of pain.

Skyla's eyes widened. "Beat her off! Quick"



"Stay right there and use thunder fang!" commanded Blake. Swanna tried to break Lilly's hold, but she hung with her teeth on for all she was worth and sent jolts of electricity coursing through Swanna, eliciting a scream of mind-blowing agony.

Blake punched the air. "That was brilliant!"

"It was not! Oh, Swanna, speak to me!" wailed Skyla.

"Swan swanna swan..." muttered Swanna, forcing himself to remain conscious.

"You need to get as high as possible. Don't go down for anything!" said Skyla urgently. Swanna nodded, spiralling upwards as fast as he could.

"...Oh, great." Aqua rings gradually healed the user, and, if Swanna stayed out of reach long enough, he'd be back to full health in a matter of minutes. Then again, Lilly could take care of it. "Use roar!"

Lilly took a deep breath and roared, shaking the earth with her fury. Swanna suddenly lost control and plummeted to earth, some desperate wing-flapping only just keeping him from a painful landing.

"Take down!" ordered Blake, as soon as he knew Swanna was still standing. Lilly charged at Swanna, head lowered to inflict maximum damage.

"Corkscrew brave bird!" commanded Skyla.

"\_Wait, what?!\_" cried Lilly, screeching to a halt at Swanna zoomed straight into the sky, a blue corona glowing around his wings. He spun as he flew, sending spiral contrails out behind him, then, without so much as a moment's warning, went into a dive.

"Take down once more!" cried Blake. It might work.

Lilly reared up on her hind legs and leapt towards the onrushing Swanna. Swanna was by now descending faster than gravity could pull him, spinning as if attached to an extremely well-built power drill as he slammed into Lilly, pretty much flattening her.

It had all begun so well; as Blake recalled Lilly, he could not help but feel a rising sense of shame. She must've had some moves powerful enough to stop that brave bird thingy... giga impact, maybe?

But he digressed. The battle wasn't over yet, so, as Blake retrieved his final poké-ball, he made a mental note to win. "Carlos, I choose you!"

The small, round, spiky pokémon materialised in front of Swanna.

"...A ferroseed? I have a charizard, you know," said Skyla bitterly. "Pity Swanna's my last pokémon. In any case, aqua jet! Circle!"

Swanna took wing once more, water welling up from under his feathers

and streaming out behind him as he flew rings around Carlos, flying as low as he dared. A ring of dust was blasted into the air as he passed, mixing with the water to form some beautiful airborne mud.

"Er... iron defence," said Blake. Carlos's shell glowed steely grey as he built up his defences.

"Make it into whirlpool and go straight up!" ordered Skyla. Swanna carefully rose above the whirling ring of muddy water, drew it up around him into a whirlpool and soared up over Carlos, adding more water as he went. The effort of sustaining an aqua ring and a whirlpool full of silt while flying straight upwards sent beads of sweat plopping down into the whirlpool, but it held firm.

"Ingrain, I suppose," muttered Blake. Carlos's roots pushed down into the arena floor, finding nutrients beneath.

"Now drop the whole lot on his spiky bonce!" shouted Skyla. Swanna gathered the whirlpool into the steepest funnel he could muster, shaping it into a spear of silt and surf, and hurled it upon Carlos with all his might. The water splashed out across the arena, soaking Skyla, Blake and everyone. Carlos, in particular, ended up damp.

"Let's see... 99% HP..." muttered Blake, checking Carlos's health readout on his pokÃ©dex. "Ah, there we go! A hundred! Ingrain's brilliant, isn't it?"

"\_Agreed,\_" said Carlos.

"...We can work with this," said Skyla, hoping she might be able to believe it. "Swanna, ice beam!"

Swanna opened his beak wide, gathering a sphere of icy energy in his mouth, then breathed out a ray of ice at Carlos. It struck home, freezing him solid.

"Carlos... is this a problem?" asked Blake, not too worried yet.

"\_Not really,\_" replied Carlos, slightly muffled by ice.

"Thought not!" grinned Blake.

"Now that his spikes are obscured, use brave bird!" ordered Skyla. With a few beats of his wings, Swanna was at full speed again, glowing blue as he streamed through the air at Carlos. He thumped into the ferroseed with all his might, then fell back in agony as the breaking ice let Carlos's spikes poke him all over. Brave bird was a risky move.

"Swanna, stay strong. Hydro pump!" commanded Skyla.

"Enough waiting, I think. Gyro ball!" ordered Blake.

Swanna's hydro pump was charging fast, but Carlos, brave-birded free of the ice, could not be stopped. He spun towards Swanna with all his might, knocking the water swan for six.

"Energy ball!" Blake went on. Carlos's eyes glowed green, and a similarly green ball of grass-type Aura formed before him. With a quick psychich push, he threw it at Swanna, hitting him square on the beak. Swanna sank to the ground, breathing heavily.

"And finally, flash cannon!" ordered Blake with a triumphant air. Blinding light flashed off Carlos, and from his eyes came a beam of steely-grey energy, blasting Swanna into Skyla's tummy. She just about managed to catch him.

For a moment, Blake wasn't sure he dared to believe Swanna had fainted. Then, when he saw Skyla recalling him and trying to remember where she'd put her badges, he knew victory had come. "Oh, yes! Yes! Carlos, you were incredible! I'll bet that ferroseed I found in the back garden was one of your relatives. You're... I mean... brilliant!"

"Yay! What he said!" squeaked Bianca.

"His pokÃ©mon didn't exactly utilise their agility..." said Cheren sourly.

Blake recalled Carlos, then headed over to Skyla. A general feeling of triumph was radiating up from his pokÃ©-balls; everyone had been there in spirit, so... would Skyla mind if he cut the badge up into little pieces so all his pokÃ©mon could have one?

"Well, Blake, we've been vanquished fair and square by your darmanitan, ferroseed and stoutland. This Jet Badge is yours," said Skyla, handing Blake a sky-blue badge shaped like a feathery wing. Blake took the badge from her hand, pinning it solemnly to his jacket, and he and Skyla bowed to one-another.

"Just try and... y'know... utilise your pokÃ©mon's physical capabilities more next time, all right? I'd be glad to have a rematch someday," said Skyla, straightening up once more.

"I'll take you up on that. Thanks for the battle," said Blake brightly, striding over to his onlooking friends. "Well, I won!"

Bianca rolled her eyes. "We \_know\_, Blake. Golly, you're such a child!"

Whitney, Cheren, Stacey and Durant gave her a synchronised withering look.

\* \* \*

><p>"Right," said Whitney meaningfully, "now that we've all got a Jet Badge, I can put this off no longer. Who wants to come and meet my family?"<p>

"I'll come gladly," said Stacey.

"Me! Me! I wanna come!" declared Bianca, hugely excited.

"Sure," said Blake.

"Why not?" said Cheren.

"\_Zephyr and Rashimo are certainly taking their sweet time,\_" commented Durant.

"Then that's settled. It's this way, come on!" declared Whitney, setting off for where she'd last seen her house.

The Blazeheart family dwelling was a fairly typical Japanese-American hybrid house: a squareish building with large, many-paned windows and a pagoda-like roof. The garden was somewhat overgrown and hosted an enormous nest, where a few young rufflets were enjoying an afternoon nap.

Noticing the rufflets, Whitney gave a little gasp of delight. "Oh my days! She had children!"

"Who did?" asked Cheren.

Whitney gave no reply, instead rushing over to the three pok  mon and hugging them all at great length. The rufflets had no idea what was going on, but they snuggled up to Whitney anyway, then carefully nuzzled Durant when he showed up.

"You three probably don't know me, but I know your mother, the braviary. I taught her how to fight," said Whitney warmly. "I'm Whitney, and this is Durant. Those humans over there are my friends." She rose to her feet again. "These rufflets are descended from Braviary."

"And who's Braviary?" asked Bianca.

"Their mum," replied Whitney. "Talking of which-"

A woman quite similar to Whitney, with the same bushy ginger hair, the same freckly appearance, the same pinky-beige skin tone, the same athletic build and a similar fashion sense, burst through the door and hugged her daughter at great length.

"It's so great to see you, Whitney! I mean, in person, as opposed to with video phones, which, incidentally, you tend to use rather more rarely than would be ideal for me. Oh, you're even more freckly than I've ever seen you before, and you've got longer hair, and... you're filthy," Mrs Blazeheart gushed. "I'll run you a bath. You go ahead and make yourself at home. Be sure and introduce me to your friends, too."

"Sure. Baths are nice and... wet... warm," said Whitney shakily, somewhat overwhelmed. "Er, lovely to see you too." Her mother kissed her once more on the forehead and bustled off to prepare the bath.

"We're much like the Weasleys, except I've only got one brother," commented Whitney.

"Oh, right," said Bianca.

Whitney led the rest of the Magnificent Many into the porch, where left their shoes and stuff before following her into the house.

"I'm quite looking forward to her being my mother-in-law, actually."

You're lucky your mother gave birth to you," Stacey said to Whitney.

"Glad to hear it," replied Whitney.

The living room contained a warm fireplace, rather superfluous considering it was the height of summer, and plenty of chairs around the coffee table, which were never superfluous. Cheren, Stacey, Bianca and Blake seated themselves, consigning Cheren to the smallest chair, which he blew very much out of proportion.

"I'll just see if I can dig out Durant's highchair," said Whitney, heading over to a cupboard. After digging through several layers of clothing, wooden stuff, Christmas ornaments and several cuddly toys, Whitney gave a cry of triumph. "There it is!"

Staggering slightly under the weight, Whitney carried out a large, ramshackle chair, carefully moulded for Durant. She placed the chair by the table. Bianca lifted Durant up to the chair, where he just about managed to squeeze himself in.

"You're certainly ingenious," Blake complimented Whitney.

"Well, you've mostly got my dad to thank there. He's a brilliant carpenter, and he's always insisted I have no talent for woodwork, so I made the chair to prove him wrong," said Whitney modestly.

"Golly!" Bianca commented.

"Gosh!" agreed Stacey.

"It's almost twice the height of my chair," muttered Cheren. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I'm glad you're all generally satisfied," said Whitney. "Now, I've got a feeling my bath should be ready. Make yourselves at home, but not too at home, since this isn't really your home. There might be cake, by the way. Ask Mum about that." So saying, she headed off to the bathroom.

With Whitney gone, the Magnificent Many found themselves at a bit of a loose end.

"So, um... what's making ourselves at home and what's too at home?" asked Blake. "Are we at home, or...?"

"We're in a home away from home!" said Bianca.

"My knees are practically level with my face," said Cheren. "Not that I'm bitter."

"Well, Whitney said we could ask her mother about the cake," Stacey pointed out. "We'll ask her about the cake, then just generally hang out and be urbane. I recommend our mannerisms are 34.458% more civilised than usual, which should be sufficient to make a good impression on Whitney's parents without portraying us as total suck-ups."

"I think that's her now," said Blake, hearing the unmistakable sound

of a woman who has just run her daughter a bath coming back downstairs to meet some other people.

"Hiya!" said Whitney's mother, coming back into the room. "Whitney's having a bath now. You're her friends, are you?"

The Magnificent Many confirmed that they were. Cheren, in particular, went into great detail on how he was double-jointed.

"Great! You're definitely not the worst people a fourteen-year-old bisexual girl could be travelling with," said Mrs Blazeheart warmly. She gave Stacey a smile. "You, in particular, are a stroke of luck. Whitney's told me everything about you!"

"...Everything? Do you mean that literally or figuratively?" asked Stacey.

"Figuratively, I guess," said Mrs Blazeheart.

"Then that's wonderful! She told me a great deal about you and Simon, too."

"And her dad?" asked Mrs Blazeheart.

Stacey shifted nervously. "Actually, no..."

"We get the impression he's a bit of a sore point," Blake interjected. "Do they not get on?"

"Well... let's just say... you know Norman, from the PokÃ©mon Adventures manga?" asked Whitney's mother carefully.

"Yeah," replied Blake.

"I hear the real Norman complained to the publisher about that," said Cheren. "So did Sabrina, Lieutenant Surge and Koga, come to think of it. At least their chairs were comfy..."

"Well, my husband's like him, except he's a computer programmer. He desparately wants Whitney to follow in his footsteps, but she's happy being a brilliant strategist, naturalist, biologist, chemist, pokÃ©mon breeder, artist, poet, writer and so on," explained Mrs Blazeheart. "Don't get me wrong, he tries to be a good father, a good husband and all that, but..." she broke off, breathing a deep, heartfelt sigh. "He could understand her better."

"Ah, right. Yes. I see. Well, now," said Blake. "Um..."

"You don't need to say anything, Blake," said Bianca tenderly. "Just keep being Whitney's bestest friend and fight Ghetsis with her and all that stuff. But don't fall in love with her, 'cause she hates love triangles."

"Does she? She used to write the most awfully convoluted love stories," Mrs Blazeheart pointed out. "Then again, she's probably grown a bit since then... anyway, which one of you is Mr Snooty-Pants?"

Cheren turned bright red. Blake and Bianca tried to conceal a fit of giggles. Stacey looked a little bit uncomfortable. Durant idly

sharpened his mandibles on Stacey's trousers.

"You?" asked Mrs Blazeheart, smiling knowingly at Cheren. "I'd know that blush anywhere. I used to have several really quite embarrassing nicknames..."

"Well, quite," said Cheren, trying to stand on his dignity. "I am Cheren, son of Gerald and Christobel, firstborn of the House of McTavish and guardian of Nuvema Town. Professor Juniper has entrusted to me the task of completing the Unovan pokÃ©dex, to which aim I am ably assisted by Blake and Bianca. Stacey's our supernumary, and I presume you already know Durant?"

"Supernumary?" repeated Stacey, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course I know Durant," said Mrs Blazeheart.

"Good. Whitney, I feel, is one of the more talented members of our group, as well as deputy leader. I am the usual leader, of course, and Stacey-

"Is considerably more than a supernumary," said Stacey coldly.

"All right... Stacey is our designated Vulcan," Cheren decided.

"...What?" said Stacey.

"Designated Vulcan! You could at least accept the position with honour, Stacey. Vulcans are a proud, noble, ancient-

"\_Fictional\_ race," said Stacey archly.

"They exist in our hearts!" snapped Cheren.

"So, Mrs Blazeheart, Whitney mentioned you might have cake," said Blake loudly, anticipating a rumble.

"Oh, gosh, I completely forgot!" gasped Bianca. "Cake! Where's the cake?!"

"We don't have any," said Mrs Blazeheart apologetically. "There might be scones, but-

"They'll do nicely. Mrs Blazeheart, may I please go and have a scone? Or several? Please please please please please pleeeeeeaaase?!" pleaded Bianca.

"...What do you expect me to say? I'd sooner paint myself orange and have you eaten by wild hydreigons than let you so much as touch a scone?" asked Mrs Blazeheart.

"Not really," Bianca admitted. "I just like saying please."

"Well... help yourself," said Mrs Blazeheart, feeling a little faint.

\* \* \*

><p>It was late at night when Zephyr and Rashimo got back to

Mistralton City.<p>

"Never," said Zephyr vehemently, to no-one in particular. "Never again!"

Her fur was matted with strawberry jam and her hooves kept sticking to the pavement, leaving a trail of jam footprints from here to the Entralink. The workers there had assured her that rains of jam were a rare occurrence, but that didn't change the fact that one had happened right on top of her.

"Zephie, ya know not everything can go your way," Rashimo pointed out.

"Well, why not?!" demanded Zephyr.

"I don't know... Causality? Things just don't always work out. You've gotta deal with it. When some blighter catches you with yer trousers down, ya pull 'em um, tighten yer belt and make lemonade!" said Rashimo encouragingly.

"...Lemonade? I think you're mixing your metaphors a bit," said Zephyr.

"Well, ya know what I mean."

"Quite. Oh, now it's dripping down my neck..."

"Then have a bath. There's a car wash over there, they'll understand," Rashimo pointed out, gesturing with his nose to a nearby car wash.

"Really? Bye!" shouted Zephyr. The resulting sonic boom broke several windows.

**\*\*~Another Author's Note~\*\***

It's probably about time I started capitalising gym badge names, to be honest, as well as including the bowing and other ceremonial activities popular in Japan.

## 25. Chapter 25: Melissa Hurts her Foot

**\*\*~Chapter Twenty-five: Let's See what's Going On with the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. Also, What's Ghetsis Been Up To Lately?~\*\***

**\*\*~Author's Note~\*\***

Today (on which this chapter is/was uploaded) marks the one year anniversary of A Thousand Shades of Grey. When I first started this story, precisely one year ago, I already knew it would be long and exciting, but most of my original ideas for the plot have rather gone by the wayside. Most of it I am happy with, apart from how I've been characterising N, which may or may not be addressed in the following chapter.

Originally, Cheren and Bianca were just going to be minor characters, and Whitney might well have been in a relationship with Blake. I also



planned to have Blake catch a pidove and use Zephyr in battle more often. That was before I started developing an interest in pok mon rights. Also, I had the notion of Whitney being the "Hero of Girl Power" or something, thereby freeing up N to be the Hero of Ideals. Whitney would have ended up completely sidelined, though, so I kiboshed that particular idea.

Since this day last year, this story has been viewed more than a thousand times, as well as receiving not one, not two, not three, not even four, but FIVE REVIEWS! Five whole reviews, all for me! What a tremendous number!

...I'm not dropping hints or anything.

In any case, please enjoy this chapter, and hopefully another year's worth as soon as I get around to writing them. You all have brilliant taste in literature and I love you considerably because of it.

On with the story!

\* \* \*

><p>The nights were cold around the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation's secret base, on an island a few miles southwest of Nuvema Town, and Melissa was beginning to regret shaving her head. N thought she looked good with a buzz-cut, but his hair was so long and shaggy he could never truly understand (until he cut it off). Of her sober green jumper and garish orange dungarees with glow-in-the-dark pink highlights, the least said the better.<p>

"At least it's summer," the Grand Marshall muttered to herself, wandering along the battlements to N's tower. There was no moonlight to cast a shadow beside her, nor give the slightest shine to the base's armour plating, so Melissa was hardly surprised when she crashed into Debbie.

"Bloody distortion realm... we really need proper lights out here," said Debbie shakily, helping Melissa to her feet.

"It'd make us too easy to see from the air," Melissa pointed out. "At least we've got plenty of carrots... which I hate, actually, but..."

"You should try carrot and cheese baguettes," Debbie suggested. "With tartare sauce."

"I don't like tartare sauce," said Melissa, stony-faced.

"Oh." Debbie looked a little put-out at that, but rallied magnificently. "Mayonnaise, then. Or hoummous!"

"Now you're talking!" said Melissa, a mayonnaise lover since childhood. "Er, anyway, N has summoned me. He wants us to clarify some things." She started towards N's tower again, stepping carefully and holding tight to Debbie. You could never be too careful on dark nights.

"What things?" asked Debbie.

"Oh... stuff, you know. Our mission, our relationship with the

pokÃ©mon league, how we plan to bludgeon Ghetsis repeatedly with pineapples and stuff bananas up his nose and cut off his feet and use them as paperweights and make him eat that stupid diadem-!" She broke off, looking slightly abashed. "Well, we'll discuss stuff."

"Right. Does it concern me?" asked Debbie earnestly.

This was enough to rouse Melissa's suspicion. "You? The helicopter pilot, messenger, swimmer, dentist, chef, mathematician, fashion designer and all-round mysterious person who seems to be one of our highest-ranking operatives and N's personal assistant now? I don't know... he didn't exactly say you could come."

"Ah, then he never said I couldn't, either!" said Debbie triumphantly.

Melissa sighed. "Look, Debbie... Deborah Cormorant-Gullywhumper, isn't it?"

"Deborah Cormorant-Gullywhumper the Third," Debbie corrected her.

"Oh. Well, in any case-"

"You don't need to say anything, Melissa," Debbie assured her. "I won't come if you don't want me. I mean, I know my place; just a plain, simple woman of many, many, many talents. Not a zoroark or anything!" She laughed a little.

"As if!" chortled Melissa. "Zoroarks need to eat sodium in order to keep up their illusions for long periods, don't they?"

"Yep," agreed Debbie.

"And something's been at our sodium, come to think of it," Melissa continued. "Strange, seeing as how no-one except me has the key to the sodium cupboard. I'll have to up the security. Maybe Trillie'd look after it..."

Debbie looked momentarily worried. "Trillie? The tropius, right?"

"Uh-huh. She's always good at guard duty. I've played Chess with her, too; she's great with her defences."

"Well... fine. Good. Brilliant! I mean, I'm totally not a zoroark, so it won't bother me at all, right?" laughed Debbie.

"Of course not!" agreed Melissa.

"Great! Well, this is N's door. See ya later!" declared Debbie, and, still laughing, she practically sprinted off. A distant scream and thump indicated that she had gone over the wall.

Sighing resignedly yet fondly at the scream and thump, Melissa entered N's tower, let the retinal scanners scan her eyes, left her massive sword, two smaller (but still pretty big) swords, two daggers, a longbow, some arrows, a plasma rifle, another spare sword, extra bottles of plasma, countless throwing stars and a few magical amulets in the hatstand, and made her way up the stairs.

(Meanwhile, in a distant city, Bianca realised she would need to up her game as the queen of run-on sentences.)

Melissa gave N's door a few loud knocks.

"Yes?" N called.

"It's me," replied Melissa. "May I enter?"

"Sure," replied N. Melissa entered, moved a few blankets out of the way and on the bed beside N. Purrloin was sitting in the young Harmonia's lap, and N himself was examining a poké-ball.

"Tell me, Melissa... what thoughts and emotions do this poké-ball call up in your soul?" asked N.

"Well... oppression. Bullying and abuse. Utterly inhuman cruelties against fine, upstanding creatures! Pokémon being stuffed in plastic thingies is an unthinkable act of callous, heartless viciousness totally unwelcome in the modern age, and I'll kill anyone who uses poké-balls for whatever reason!" declared Melissa.

"Of course, as I once thought," said N, his voice betraying little emotion.

"Er... what?" said Melissa.

"Melissa, old chum... what if I were to tell you that Purrloin... this young man here... actually prefers sleeping in this very poké-ball?"

"\_True story,\_" Purrloin agreed.

Melissa's heart skipped a beat, and for a moment, she felt as if she might faint. Then she felt as if she might kill N. Then she felt as if she might give Purrloin a thorough psychological examination. Then she felt she needed to study poké-balls in greater depth. Then she felt ashamed of thinking such thoughts, and finally felt only confusion.

"...Are you the zoroark who's been at our sodium?" asked Melissa suspiciously.

"No," N assured her. "Purrloin just said it was true, didn't he?"

The world was dropping out from under Melissa's feet. "...Are you sure, Purrloin?"

"\_Of course! It's warm, comfy and quiet, and there's a great wi-fi signal. And whenever N carries the poké-ball with me in it... I feel like I can touch his heart, and he can touch mine. And I remember my sister... I'm still not entirely happy about her dying, to be honest, but her life was her own to nobly sacrifice. I guess that's why I like N so much. Because she did,\_" replied Purrloin.

"That makes no sense at all!" wailed Melissa. "I think I need to sit down..."

"You \_are\_ sitting down, Melissa," N pointed out.

"Oh," said Melissa. "Evidently, it's not working." Then she fainted.

\* \* \*

><p>When Melissa came to, she was in her own room. Judging by the clear blue light shining through the window, it was morning.<p>

"Uggghhhhhh... pokÃ©-balls and purrlains and Natural Gropius Harmonia, oh my..." groaned Melissa. "Oh, well. Time for breakfast, I suppose."

As Melissa changed into her usual clothes, not thinking too hard about how she'd got into her pyjamas without being conscious, she noticed a piece of paper pinned to the wardrobe. Closer inspection revealed some of N's unnaturally precise handwriting.

"\_Gone to seek truth and discover self and stuff. Might meet Magnificent Many, also. Please hold down fort while I am gone. -N,\_" read Melissa. "He's... gone? Gone?!" She tore the note to pieces, crushed them into a little ball, stomped on it a few times, retrieved her plasma rifle (which someone had left by her bed) and shot the mutilated piece of paper, then pulled her bedside rug over the charred hole in the floor. "How could he just go?! Now, of all times, and after coming out with something so \_stupid\_! I mean, pokÃ©-balls?!" screamed Melissa. "POKÃ%MON DO NOT LIKE POKÃ%-BALLS!"

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Hi, Melissa,<em>" Samuel the samurott greeted Melissa, as she stomped past in a terrible fury. "\_I notice you're stomping past in a terrible fury. You do realise excessive stomping can damage your feet, right?\_"

Melissa came to an exasperated halt. "You're an idiot, Samuel, and a lunkhead, a poltroon, an iconoclast, a fathead, a reprobate, a blackguard and a doofus, and I won't hesitate to stomp on any of your limbs if you push me to it. Any questions?"

"\_None whatsoever, save this,\_" replied Samuel blithely. Melissa's terrible bad moods were nothing new to him, Heidi and Trillie. "\_Do you like my new pokÃ©-ball? I made it myself. It's got an en-suite bathroom and everything!\_"

He proffered a large green pokÃ©-ball with yellow stripes. Melissa contemplated the ball. Technically Samuel had the right to choose his own dwellings, but... WHY?!

"...It's round," she finally commented. "Sort of... spherical."

"\_I know, hence the "ball" part,\_" said Samuel.

"Yeah... and green," said Melissa. "With yellow bits. Er... very nice. I'll be off now, shall I?"

"\_Nice seeing you,\_" said Samuel, waving a paw as Melissa resumed her

terribly furious stomping past. She spent a great deal of money on heavy boots and floor reinforcements- just one of the Grand Marshall's many duties- and she was determined to get her money's worth.

However, as Melissa made her way to Bronius's room (he probably knew where N had gone), she found she couldn't help but put some serious thought into the question of pokÃ©-balls. If a sensible samurott and a prestigious purrlain claimed to like being inside them... could they just be going against the grain for the sake of it? Some sort of counterculture? Or could she actually, all things considered, have, in fact, been wrong? Ideologically?!

\_Get a grip, Melissa,\_ Melissa inwardly chided herself. \_There's no way you could be wrong about this. Every pokÃ©mon in the world except Samuel and Purrlain hates pokÃ©-balls. They've got to! I can't be wrong!\_

\_...But then N would be wrong. Which is better than me being wrong, but...\_

\* \* \*

><p>Heidi's belly brushed against the clouds as she floated gently across the sky, barely needing to use her wings. This was the life: cool, crisp air all around her, perfect aerodynamics, surprisingly low density... who wouldn't want to be a hydreigon? Purrlain had an even easier time of it, even though he had nothing but a pair of flippers and several helium balloons, and N was exhausted.<p>

"I've... made a... poor... decision!" panted N, barely making himself heard over the noise of his pedal-powered gyrocopter. "Totally... blooming... exhausted!"

"\_I'll be glad to carry you if need be,\_ " Heidi offered.

"No, no! I'm fine!" N assured her, lying through his teeth. "Good exercise!"

"\_If you're sure...\_" said Heidi.

"\_He isn't,\_ " Purrlain pointed out.

"Shut up," said N.

The group had been flying together for some time now, and N knew they'd have to land soon or else his legs would give out completely. It had seemed like such a fine idea at first: just the three of them soaring through the skies together, seeking the truth about ideals, the ideal truth or whatever... In reality, though, N wasn't built to fly. If his Aura grew strong enough, he could fly without the gyrocopter, but that kind of power was a long way off.

"Touch down... that tower!" huffed N, pointing as best he could to a tower, standing proud many miles below. He immediately eased off on the pedals, gasping with relief as his gyrocopter started to glide towerwards. He had a very good feeling about that tower.

\* \* \*

><p>The following day dawned bright and cheerful, not that much light could enter the Dark Tower of Doom, positioned as it was in the middle of the Acid Lake of Doom, surrounded by the twelve Volcanoes of Doom and kept dark by the Thick, Persistent Clouds of Doom.<p>

"So," said Ghetsis doomily, getting into the spirit of things, "it would appear that my idiot son has crashed into Celestial Tower. This is more fortuitous than it may seem: there is an item there of which we have great need-"

"\_We know, Ghetsis,\_" said Shadow Charizard archly.

Ghetsis stiffened. "I am a lord!"

"\_We know, your lordship,\_" Shadow Charizard corrected himself, giving his forelock an extremely sarcastic tug.

"Imbecile..." muttered Ghetsis. "Anyway. There is an item in Celestial Tower of which we have great need, and with my idiot son back in the picture, it is more imperative than ever that we act swiftly and decisively!" He thumped the table hard enough to send shockwaves through everyone (except Shadow Heatran). "As you all know-"

"\_You love the sound of your voice,\_" said Shadow Charizard, attracting a few chuckles from around the table.

"SHUT UP!" snapped Ghetsis. He took a few deep breaths and cleared his throat. "Now. As you all know, N actually is my son, although he thinks he's been adopted or something. It's been a while since I really thought about it. In any case, N is a direct descendant of the Harmonia bloodline, sired many millennia ago by Jenny Harmonia herself, and so he is guaranteed to be able to unlock the Light and Dark Stones. He is best suited to Reshiram, so I will force him to awaken her, then I shall turn her into a thousand shadow clones! And I, Lord Ghetsis, WILL RULE THE WORLD!"

Ghetsis waited for rapturous applause. There was none.

"You'll all have a share, of course," Ghetsis sighed.

The deafening cheers lasted for several minutes. Ghetsis smiled. These shadow clones were so-

"\_Just a minute!\_" Shadow Charizard interjected. "\_We're still badly outnumbered by the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation, and we know N won't go down without a fight. There are people guarding Celestial Tower, too. We simply don't have enough-\_"

Ghetsis barely glanced his way as he raised a hand, sending a blast of purple lightning through Shadow Charizard. The shadow clone fell to the ground in agony, smouldering and sparking like an overheating battery, and in the poor light of the tower all anyone could see of him was the pitiful, dwindling glow in his eyes. What they could not see was his tail-flame.

"Any other objections?" asked Ghetsis, not bothering to disguise his triumphant smugness. "None? Jolly good. Shadow Lugia, I want you and

your brother to fly to Celestial Tower and bring me N. You will carry four lightweight agents apiece for supplementary purposes. Understood?"

"\_Understood, O Dread Master of Assorted Horrible Things,\_" said Shadow Lugia meekly.

"\_What she said,\_" agreed Shadow Ho-oh.

"Then get going!"

\* \* \*

><p>"N, what were you thinking?!" demanded Melissa, standing over a bandage-encased Natural Gropius Harmonia in the small hospital outside Celestial Tower.<p>

Although his lungs could barely work his vocal chords, N forced himself to reply. "My legs were tired and the tower looked safe. I guess I misjudged the trajectory a little..."

"No, what I mean is, what were you thinking vis a vis leaving without telling me?"

"I \_did\_ tell you."

"With a scrap of paper, yeah, but was you telling me in person really too much to ask?"

"Well, you were sleeping like a log. It's not healthy to wake someone up after they pass out like you did."

"That reminds me, are you serious about pokÃ©-balls not being evil?" asked Melissa. "Because if you are-"

"You'll grow up and just accept it?"

"No."

"I thought not..." N gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Look. I've been talking to the pokÃ©mon of the skies lately, and none of them have any problems with pokÃ©-balls. I got into a few discussions about air travel routes, actually, but pokÃ©-balls were never a problem. There was also a fearow on an errand for his trainer."

"And you convinced him to abandon human rule and live his life as free as a literal bird, right?"

"Actually, no. He and his trainer adore each other."

"How do you know?"

"She was riding on his back."

"And you didn't push her off?!"

"No! Melissa, we've seriously misjudged pokÃ©mon trainers in general," said N severely. "Sooner or later, you'll need to rethink things."

"It simply can't be true-

"Exactly! I don't know what's true or not!" snapped N. "We need to listen, Melissa, and see, smell, taste, feel... do psychic stuff, maybe. We can't just stick blindly to the same beliefs we've held since Ghetsis was with us. We can and have been wrong!"

"I-!" was all Melissa could think to say, although a fair few things she hadn't thought to say were fighting to come out, preferably at great volume in N's direction. This was beyond belief. N had betrayed her, Heidi and Purrloin were happy to go along for the ride... "You're nuts! I'm taking command of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. Don't try and stop me!"

"Melissa, listen to yourself! You want to do what's right, don't you? Well, how do you know what's right?!"

"Easy! Ghetsis told me everything I... er... oh." Well, that put a crimp in things. There was no way Melissa was flying into a zealous rage and doing something highly unreasonable just to defend Ghetsis's beliefs, even if they were also her own. "You've got a point there."

"I know I have," said N. "Now, I've got a feeling the visiting hours end in a few minutes, so you'd better go. I recommend you visit the tower. The local ghost-types use it as a sort of clubhouse."

"I'll bear that in mind," said Melissa, rising to her feet. "Goodbye N. Good luck recovering from... that. 'Bye!"

And she was off, stomping again, as she did when she was having ideological issues. Melissa would've stomped even if she were a ballet dancer.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Heavy-footed ballet... yeah, I can just see myself,<em> Melissa thought, chuckling a little as she made her way to the tower. It was a disappointing sight, actually, for something called Celestial Tower: just a yellowish-brown brick structure, tapering towards the top. A few small, dark windows were visible around the outside, and some thin ledges spiralled up the outer walls. There was a small bashed-in patch on the second floor, shaped suspiciously like N.

It was cold inside the tower, as Melissa realised the moment she stepped over the threshold. She shivered slightly. Ghost-type pokémon would love it here. The countless rows of tall blue tombstones would make them feel quite at home. Clubhouse indeed...

"Is anybody here?!" called Melissa, coming at last to the stairs. "Any pokémon fancy a chat about civil rights and interspecies relations?!"

There was no reply. It was as if the darkness was swallowing Melissa's voice. Maybe the next floor up...

"Anyone home?!" called Melissa, for once walking quietly as she made her way up the steps, a wide stone staircase spiralling up the inside



of the tower.

"\_For pity's sake, have some respect for the dead!\_" snapped a passing chandelure. "\_Some of the pokÃ©mon here have been dead for thousands of years, and you know how they hate people being loud in the vicinity of their bodies!\_"

"Oh. Sorry," said Melissa. "Uh, what's your view on pokÃ©mon liberation?"

"\_...Liberation from what?\_"

"From being captured, being used in battles... that kind of thing."

"\_Oh. Well, I don't really think pokÃ©mon can be controlled by force,\_" said the chandelure. "\_I mean, if you tried to enslave me, you'd suffer terribly. Some of the litwicks around here might not be so resilient, though, so...\_"

"They'd need people to look after them," Melissa suggested. "Such as you, or a benevolent human organisation dedicated to protecting innocent pokÃ©mon."

"\_Well, yes. That would do it.\_"

This conversation was going well; time to get down to brass tacks. "What about pokÃ©-balls, then?"

"\_PokÃ©-balls? They're completely unfair!\_" replied the chandelure, with a newfound vehement edge to his voice.

Melissa felt a great weight leave her heart.

"\_It allows pokÃ©mon to exploit humans and get carried everywhere like pampered pets instead of walking, galloping, crawling, floating, swimming, flying, oozing, teleporting, rolling, slithering, sidewinding, bouncing or burrowing like honest people!\_" the chandelure continued.

The great weight was back with reinforcements.

"\_Rest assured, woman whose name I know not, I would never ask you to carry me, and any pokÃ©mon who would does not deserve our time. Humans have rights, and I won't hear a word to the contrary!\_" ranted the chandelure.

"Uh... I never actually thought about it like that," mumbled Melissa.

"\_I fear you would not have. The whole of society is geared towards oppressing you,\_" said the chandelure sagely.

"Well... fine. I'll take my leave now," said Melissa, rushing off down the stairs before the chandelure could realise what was happening. Her head was spinning. Humans were being oppressed by pokÃ©mon all of a sudden? That made no sense. Nothing made sense! There was only one thing for it: she'd have to make her own sense.

\_But I don't know how... I've never not known what to do...\_

Melissa forced the thoughts out of her head. Self-doubt never did her any good. As of now, all she could do was find out what was actually happening with pokémon liberation, then work out who she needed to beat up to make things right. That always worked.

"Just you sit tight, N. I intend to seek the truth while you're bedridden, and if it has the nerve to hide from me, I'll punch it into next week!" declared Melissa. She saw a boulder by the road, approved of it and struck a dramatic pose on top, raising her sword like a flagpole. "Truth, I'm coming for you! Prepare to die!"

Silhouetted by a perfectly timed bolt of lightning, Melissa leapt from her boulder, tripped over, got up again, kicked the boulder, screamed in agony and hopped off to see to her ruined foot.

## 26. Chapter 26: Mostly About Whitney

\*\*~Chapter Twenty-six: Whitney's Father Shouts at Her and Melissa Shouts at Everyone, As Does the Chandelure, Although we Don't See him Doing It~\*\*

"Cheren's log, Wednesday the eleventh of July: Zephyr and Rashimo seem to have disappeared. No biggie, though. Today, the Magnificent Many shall visit Celestial Tower in order to examine the ghost-type pokémon within. I have ensured that my team are fully aware of how to behave in a cemetery-"

"You crazy, overgrown pea-brained fathead! You just wait 'till I'm in the Elite Four!"

"You, in the Elite Four?! You're nothing more than an ungrateful brat with a brain smaller than your tonsils!"

Cheren sighed. "Whitney and her father have been sojourning together, but it appears that they have cut short their expedition." His log, too, was cut short as the bombastic Mr Blazeheart and his even more bombastic daughter stormed in, both covered in mud from the knees down.

"What's going on, Whitney?" asked Bianca, looking seriously worried.

"Yeah, what hare-brained scheme to get our daughter to take up computer programming was it this time?" asked Mrs Blazeheart, casually reaching for a toasting fork.

Whitney took a deep breath. "My idiot dad insisted we go to the salt marshes-"

"-tried to warn her about quickksand, but-"

"-just pushed me clean off the walkway-"

"-insisted on jumping in the deepest patch of mud-"

"-for ten minutes, ranting and raving and trying to make me

promise-

"-completely broke down and cried her eyes out-

"-got Porygon to use psychic on me, but it wasn't strong enough-

"-couldn't even programme a proper upgrade-

"-flamethrower his eyebrows off-

"-just pulled me in as soon as I tried pulling her-

"-right over my head, Porygon couldn't stop laughing-

"-little minx wouldn't even apologise-

"-kept saying it was my fault-

"-spanking her, but she just used iron defence-

"-just pulled us both out myself. If I was some kind of wimpy computer geek instead of a Knight of Aura, we'd both be dead now!" finished Whitney.

"That's outrageous! Some of my best friends are physically gifted computer programmers!" snapped Mr Blazeheart.

"I wouldn't be! I can't juggle pok mon training, martial arts, studying Aura and being really wild and fierce and tough with learning how to programme!" retorted Whitney.

"If you would just give it a try-

"I gave it a try and I hated it!"

"You didn't try for long enough!"

"It was four months!"

"I wish Simon were here, don't you?" said Mrs Blazeheart, pushing between her husband and daughter. "I mean, the four of us together again, like before... you two arguing about computers, me and him agreeing about fashion and cars..."

"Simon is an imbecile," said Mr Blazeheart. "He wears sheath dresses and wants to buy a Porsche when he grows up. I kept telling him a pinafore and a Toyota would be better, but no..."

"He has the right to choose!" Whitney pointed out.

"He is making the wrong choices, as are you!" retorted Mr Blazeheart.

"We have the right to make these choices! You can't plant an oak tree and try to make it a pine tree, and we're not even trees!" declared Whitney.

"You're-!" Mr Blazeheart paused, considering that for a few rather awkward moments. "You're the most horrible daughter in the universe

and I hate you!"

"Oh, can you just... not?!" snapped Mrs Blazeheart. "Rodney, Whitney's leaving today. Do you really want her to go away knowing you hate her? Do you want to hate her? Whitney, do you want to hate your dad?"

"No!" replied Whitney.

"Of course not! It's just... I do hate her, and she's not helping!" Mr Blazeheart explained. "I'm changing the subject. Don't try and stop me!"

\* \* \*

><p>They tried to stop him, but had little success.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"Bianca, I hear your father's one of the more sensible ones. Care to weigh in?" asked Mr Blazeheart.<p>

"Er, sure. Daddy's always been a bit too safety-conscious after he was involved in a Rhyhorn racing accident. He divorced Mummy, took me here to Unova and tried to start a new life, but I always wanted to do adventurous stuff and he wouldn't let me, so I moved out after my twelfth birthday."

"You did?!" cried Stacey.

"We looked after her. It wasn't that bad," Blake reassured her.

"Anyway, I became a teenage rebel and rejected society and stuff, but I really missed Daddy and he missed me, so we got back together again a few months before I left to be a pokÃ©mon trainer. We kind of love each other to bits now, but I had to stand up to him first," Bianca finished.

"I've been standing up to Dad for years," Whitney pointed out.

"I've been standing up to Whitney for years," Mr Blazeheart pointed out. "What about the rest of you? Anything to say?"

"Well, um... you can't push your daughter in quicksand, even if it doesn't really affect her. That's child abuse no matter how you look at it," said Blake severely.

"I concur wholeheartedly with Whitney. No-one has the right to decide your path for you. Your parents should, at most, have 12.658% of the influence over your hobbies and future path split evenly between them, and should be willing to concede with good grace when you've proven yourself wise enough to choose upon a good path," said Stacey.

"She's not wise enough! That's the point!" said Mr Blazeheart. "Anyone, anyone with more than a few brain cells to rub together- and I mean ANYONE- would never refuse to be a computer programmer! Whitney is clearly a fool-"

"Convenient, isn't it?" Cheren piped up. "That you've carefully tailored your ideology so you can believe Whitney must become a programmer at all costs, regardless of her personal feelings."

"...And right she should. Listen up, young lady, you're the most utterly worthless-" began Mr Blazeheart.

"...Young lady?" That was more than Whitney could take. She leapt to her feet, her hands turning sharp and metallic and her face incandescent with fury. "Young lady?! And worthless?! I've done more than you could dream of, you guttersnipe! I battled Cilan, Chili and Cress in one sitting, beat Aspertia Gym, reached the quarter-finals in every pok  mon league tournament since I turned ten! I've got three thousand followers on that fanfiction website Aardvark123 showed me! I've written a whole book of poetry, two whole books of art, travelled the length and breadth of Unova, and what've you done?!"

"Single-handedly created the algorithms which control the national grid?" said Mr Blazeheart, with quiet smugness.

Whitney opened and closed her mouth a few times.

"You look like a magikarp," said Mr Blazeheart.

"...Well, I'll give you that. You're definitely one of the better computer programmers," Whitney conceded. "But I'm still not following in your footsteps, and that's my final word. I'm off to Celestial Tower. Coming, anyone?"

She strode off without another word, Durant following in her wake.

"Coming!" declared Bianca, rushing off after Whitney and Durant.

For a few moments, the remaining Magnificent Many got ready in silence. Mr Blazeheart was stony-faced, until a rather nasty grin spread over his visage. "You know, they're having a sale on upgrades and dubious discs near Celestial Tower. I wonder how she'll handle a porygon-Z's aurora beam..."

"You'd better not try anything," said Mrs Blazeheart warningly. "I've tolerated you for now, but setting a pok  mon on our daughter is a step too far. Actually, that quicksand business was a step too far anyway, so you'll be two steps too far."

"Me, set a pok  mon on her? Perish the thought!" laughed Mr Blazeheart. "In any case, I'm coming to Celestial Tower with you lot and you can't stop me, so don't bother trying."

"Oh, great!" said Blake. "How wonderful! How delightful!"

"Just try and ignore him. Me, Simon and Whitney always do," Mrs Blazeheart suggested.

"You're not helping!" snapped Mr Blazeheart.

"I am literally hopping up and down with excitement at the prospect of getting to know my future father-in-law a bit better! Come along,

fellows and fellowettes, let us attempt to catch up to Whitney, Durant and Bianca!" said Stacey, sarcasm pouring off her voice and pooling around the table as she got up and headed for the porch. "Oh, great. Quicksand all over the doormat..."

\* \* \*

><p>The atmosphere that afternoon was strained, to say the least.<p>

"So then, Whitney, what's the deal with this ridiculous poetry you've been writing while not being a computer programmer?" asked Mr Blazeheart.

"Er... I didn't show you any of it," Whitney pointed out.

Mr Blazeheart smiled.

"You went through my bag while I was asleep, didn't you?" said Whitney knowingly.

Mr Blazeheart grinned.

Whitney sighed. "I really couldn't care less any more. If you take anything, you know you'll regret it."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of stealing from you," said Mr Blazeheart magnanimously. "I would, however, dream of reading your terrible poetry:

\_O Stacey, thou nymph, whose cheeks oft flush red,\_

\_With you, on love, my heart is well fed.\_

\_I loveth thy skin, and thy hair so bright orange,\_

\_Thou art sweet and fresh, just like an orange.\_" He paused for a moment, letting the poem sink in. "Really, now, that's pathetic."

Blake, Cheren and Bianca made an almighty effort not to burst out laughing.

"That was private!" cried Whitney, turning bright red. "And it's only the first draft!"

"An orange?!" guffawed Stacey, laughing so hard she might burst. "Oh, Whitney, you're a card!"

"I did not give you permission to read my poetry! That was completely inappropriate!" ranted Whitney.

"Well, I never gave you permission not to be a computer programmer," Mr Blazeheart pointed out.

"That's different! It was my poetry, which I wrote for Stacey's private enjoyment," said Whitney, rage subsiding a little on the surface.

"Well, you're my daughter," said Mr Blazeheart. "I created you to be

a computer programmer."

"It doesn't work that way!" said Whitney furiously.

"Well, how does it work?!" demanded Mr Blazeheart.

"The way of me giving you a jolly good clout if you don't stop bullying her," offered Cheren. "You, Mr Blazeheart, are a disgrace to the term "father". We have already made contingency plans involving Bianca's father, but now that you've come along, I see no reason not to adapt our original plans."

"Seriously. We've written them all down, if you're interested," Blake interjected. "Most of the plans end with Mr Redwood being tried by a jury of his peers, found guilty and sentenced to five weeks' sympathetic psychological counselling to get him back on the right path."

"...And just who is Mr Redwood?" asked Mr Blazeheart.

"My father," said Bianca.

"An honest, sensible chap, then. I don't see why you'd want to gang up on him," said Mr Blazeheart. "Really, you're frightfully domineering children..."

\* \* \*

><p>Celestial Tower was the northernmost building in Mistralton City, and, as I might have mentioned, rather a disappointing sight. Blake had been expecting at least five storeys, maybe a giant flaming eye and some spikes at the top, but it just looked like... well... an old stone tower. Whitney, on the other hand, had developed a vague fondness for the tower over the years, and felt-<p>

"Oh my days! It's her!" screamed Bianca, starting so violently she might never stop. "Melinda Coronet!"

"...I'm Melissa Coronelle," Melissa corrected her, walking (well, stomping) over with Heidi and Purrloin.

"Who?!" cried Mr Blazeheart.

"An enemy. Er, well, possibly not, but she was, so... let's all be careful," Blake proposed.

"Agreed," said Cheren, moving in front of Bianca. "Melissa, what brings you to the vicinity of Celestial Tower?"

"Investigations," replied Melissa. "I'm looking for the Truth. Have you seen it?"

"The Truth? Ah. That... now, that... that is... a, um... a quest and a half," said Cheren, noting the capital T. "Are you after any particular Truth?"

"Mostly the Truth about pokÃ©mon rights," replied Melissa. "N seems to have got it into his head that pokÃ©mon trainers aren't evil and pokÃ©mon aren't as severely oppressed as we thought. Now that Ghetsis is gone, we can look into it a bit more."

Whitney looked at Blake, who looked back at her. There was mutual understanding in that look: trust, but verify. They'd both seen Ghetsis's dramatic reveal, but that didn't mean the rest of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation were guaranteed to be on their side.

"Anyway, since you're here, I'd like to interview you all," said Melissa. "If there are any lies or funny business you'll get cut into several pieces, though, so watch it."

"Interviews? Well..." said Cheren thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes please! I love being interviewed!" declared Bianca. "It's never happened before, but I love it!"

"It can't hurt," agreed Stacey.

"Sure. Fine," said Blake.

Cheren had never been more excruciatingly aware of how trivial his input could be when decisions were made. "...Fine. If we must."

"What about you, Dad?" asked Whitney.

"I have literally no idea what's going on, but... yeah, fine," said Mr Blazeheart, shrugging broadly.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ms Redwood, do you ever hit the pokÃ©mon you train?" asked Melissa.<p>

"What?! No!" cried Bianca, horrified by the very idea.

"Do you shout at them, insult them, deride them, anything?" asked Melissa.

"I'd never!" cried Bianca.

"Liar! You beat Claribelle, don't you?! I'll bet you pour water on Templeton whenever he loses a battle! I'll bet you starve Perdita whenever you're in a bad mood!"

The tears were streaming down Bianca's cheeks. "I... I'd never dream of all this stuff! I swear, I'd never-"

"LIAR!" roared Melissa, leaping to her feet and retrieving her two arm-length katanas. "You are the most shameless, loathesome creature in the universe, and I swear I'll-"

With a flash of light and a roar of primordial fury, Templeton leapt from his pokÃ©-ball, fists ablaze. Melissa stopped in her tracks.

"\_Your aggression leaves a foul taste in my mouth, so-called Melissa so-called Coronelle. Leave us, or I'll show you what an emboar is capable of,\_" growled Templeton.

Deathly silent, Melissa stepped slowly out of the interview shed, not



even bothering to stomp on the oh-so-satisfying bubblewrap doormat as she passed. Templeton folded his arms in the fashion most beloved of the strong, silent type.

Bianca breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Templeton." She threw her arms around the emboar, lovingly burrowing into his thick, warm fur. "You saved my calamari! I knew you'd never let her hurt me or anything."

"\_...She woke me up,\_" said Templeton, slightly bemused.

\* \* \*

><p>"Templeton got the drop on me. Rest assured, I won't be so easily scared this time," said Melissa coldly, as much for her own benefit as the other's. "If Blake bursts in here to drag me off you, he won't know what hit him!"<p>

Samantha rolled her eyes. "\_If you can actually hurt me somehow, Blake won't be able to do much.\_"

"Well... fine," said Melissa. "But, um... doesn't he force you to worship him like a god? Don't you have to risk life and limb to win battles if you want your next meal?"

"\_Melissa... I'm a samurott. We used to eat humans,\_" said Samantha, already tired of Melissa.

"Oh." This was great news, but Melissa wasn't ready to change her mind just yet. "So... Blake allows you a certain degree of independence?"

"\_Allows?!\_" Samantha snorted. "\_Look... you're kind of to N as I am to Blake. Understand?\_"

Melissa blinked. "No."

"\_I mean... I'm his Melissa,\_" Samantha clarified. "\_His most trusted ally and comrade-in-arms, as well as... someone who does battles for him, which is where I differ from you. I'm not a slave.\_"

"Well, I... uh..." The penny could not stay airborne a moment longer, so, naturally, it dropped. "Alllll right!" Melissa hugged Samantha, kissed her on the nose, jumped for joy a little and rushed out of the tent. "Hey, Heidi, Purrloin, I've found a good one! N was right! The world's better than we thought!"

"\_Great! But, um... who're we going to fight now?\_" asked Purrloin.

"I haven't decided yet."

Still sitting there in silence, Samantha sighed. It was better than her last interview, that was for sure, but that'd been when Professor Juniper tied her to a chair...

\* \* \*

><p>"Well, I can safely say today's been brilliant!" declared Bianca, as she, Blake, Whitney, Stacey, Cheren, Durant, Mr Blazeheart and

their new sort-of-friends Heidi, Melissa and Purrloin headed back to the city centre. "We discussed matters of import and export, did stuff in Celestial Tower, got shouted at by a chandelure- bit of a weirdo, really- and I cuddled Templeton. It doesn't get much better than this."<p>

"Bianca," said Blake, "it's not even one o'clock yet."

"Oh." Bianca pondered that fact for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Then that's even better! We can go to Route 7 and research pokÃ©mon! Come on, no time like the present!"

"We're eating first," said Blake heavily.

"...We are?"

Cheren looked back at Blake, a playful gleam in his eye. "T-minus five, four, three, two, one-"

"YAHOO!" yelled Bianca, leaping clean over Cheren's head (and he was the tallest; a clean two centimetres above Whitney). "I'm having pineapples and celery on toast! No, wait, pancakes with sausages and chocolate! Or a banana cream sandwich! Wait, I know, how about an Indian meal? We went past an Indian restaurant, and I love Indian food!"

Food was never far from Bianca's mind; fair enough, considering how much energy she used all the time, but her behaviour could sometimes take the cake.

\* \* \*

><p>While Bianca was busy taking the cake, the others were having their own conversation. "I've been on Route 7 before, you know. It's got grass as tall as this!" Whitney declared, raising her arms as high as she could reach; fairly impressive, as she was the second-tallest of the group, about three centimetres higher than Blake.<p>

"It wouldn't seem so tall if you were a computer programmer," Mr Blazeheart pointed out. Whitney stuck her tongue out at him.

"You could make your own porygon, get it to levitate you over the grass..." Mr Blazeheart pressed on. "Speaking of which, what did you think of Porygon-Z?"

"\_I thought he was a bit strange, actually,\_" said Durant. "\_A bit... flaky.\_"

"Well, dubious discs can have that effect... the people who made porygons never actually technically approved them," said Mr Blazeheart.

"So you've corrupted your own pokÃ©mon with an open-source update. Brilliant. Good going," said Whitney, sarcasm boiling out of her ears to form a cloud around her head.

"I... I did not corrupt him! I merely... uh..." hearing Whitney say "open-source update" had thrown him off a little. "I improved him! Porygon-Z is now perfected!"

"They said that about Mewtwo," Stacey pointed out. "But seriously, I can tell Melissa's making a huge effort not to leap down your throat about this, so I shall broach the subject. How did you know Porygon wanted to evolve into a porygon-Z?"

"...I didn't. Porygon had no emotions or desires before he evolved, though," said Mr Blazeheart. "We could hardly call him- it, back then, a sentient being."

"And when he was a porygon-2?" said Whitney. "They can think."

"Er..." A bead of sweat rolled down Mr Redwood's neck. "I, uh... didn't ask. I mean, why should I, anyway? He'd barely been sentient five seconds when I gave him the dubious disc!"

"And you somehow assumed that gave you the right to evolve him without his consent?!" yelled Melissa, who could keep silent no longer. "I think I understand now... There are good pok  mon trainers and bad ones. And you're a bad one. Whitney, do you mind if I clobber him?"

"Er..." Whitney bit her lip, quickly weighing up the pros and cons in her mind. "Well, it's not as if I'd... but, um... he is my dad, at the end of the day."

Mr Blazeheart nodded approvingly. "Thank you. It's good to know I'm someone's dad at the end of the day, even if she isn't a computer programmer and she's the most awful pok  mon trainer who ever lived." He immediately realised he'd hit upon something and pressed on. "Melissa, why aren't you all up in her business? She once banished Durant into the wilderness just to get rich."

"W-what?! How can you bring that up-"

"It's all right, Whitney. Durant told me all about that," Melissa interrupted, laying a comforting hand on Whitney's shoulder. "He also told me about all the fun you've had together, the laughter, the occasional tears, and how you never forget to polish him."

Whitney blushed.

"Anyway, back to the subject of Porygon-Z. The P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation still has work to do, and you're where I shall start." Melissa leaned down towards Mr Blazeheart's pok  ball pocket. "Hey, Porygon-Z! Did you want to stay as a porygon-2?"

"Not really," came the muffled, electronic reply, speaking fluent Japanese. "I'm more powerful now, ain't I? And if Rodney and his self-righteous computer-hating daughter get stuck in quicksand again, I can get them out in two shakes of a mareep's tail! Unless he wants me to leave Whitney."

"Well, well! It looks as if I've got an ally!" said Mr Blazeheart, all smiles. "Porygon-Z, we're going to have some good times."

\* \* \*

><p>By the way, Blake is about seven centimetres taller than Stacey,

who is three centimetres taller than Bianca. Bianca is a hundred and fifty centimetres tall, so I think you can work the rest out. If you can't, I recommend you try Khan Academy. Their section on early maths should help you out a lot.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>It turned out that the Indian restaurant was having a special offer on stuffed parathas, so, amid a dazzling array of heady, spicy incenses and eye-wateringly hot curries, the Magnificent Many and their temporary companions dined on stuffed parathas. They took up three tables, with Heidi having one all to herself.<p>

"This is SO GOOD!" squealed Bianca, busily chowing down her second paratha. "It could use a bit more treacle, though."

"Treacle?!" cried Blake.

"That's the most outrageous thing I've ever heard!" snapped the chef, who was passing by. "It'd be like putting tomato ketchup on sushi."

"Just an idea..." pouted Bianca.

"It occurs to me," said Cheren, "that Whitney's ancient Greek money must be running out by now. Who's paying for the meal?"

"I'll pay for anyone who has ever done any kind of computer programming," offered Mr Blazeheart.

"I'll pay for anyone who hasn't," offered Melissa.

"Oh, you don't need to. I've got a savings account," Blake pointed out. "Just a couple of thousand yen, but--"

"Enough for the bicycle you owe me," said Whitney.

"...What?" Blake had completely forgotten the bicycle. "You can't still be..."

"Oh, don't worry. I won't mallet you on the head about it," Whitney reassured him. "And I've still got one drachma left. That should be enough."

"Yay!" said Bianca. "All is resolved!"

"No it's not! I can't discriminate against non-programmers if she's paying!" said Mr Blazeheart hotly. "I'm off. I do not except to receive a bill."

\* \* \*

><p>And thus did it come to pass that, with much rejoicing from his daughter, Rodney Blazeheart received his bill and parted ways with the Magnificent Many. Heidi, Purrloin and Melissa left on better terms soon after, planning to visit N and see if they could find any more Truth lying around the place. Our heroes were alone once more: just five humans and almost thirty pokÃ©mon all travelling together. The Sun shone bright in the sky, Blake was fast developing a ponytail, and Route 7 seemed just a hop, skip and a jump

away.<p>

After a few minutes of hopping, skipping and jumping, Whitney started waxing eloquent.

\_ "O Stacey, thou nymph, thou goddess of cute, \_

\_ You maketh me feel my soul is astute. \_

\_ My heart is aglow whene'er I can see you, \_

\_ I love you so much, I never will flee you. \_"

Stacey stared at Whitney in amazement. Such a silver tongue, delicately painting those lyrics on the air, and from such deceptively tomboyish lips, above which two eyes like limpid pools of starlight sat in the vicinity of an oh-so-freckly nose...

"\_ With you, I feel like a valkyrie queen, \_

\_ And you my Brunhilda, though th'art but a teen. \_

\_ I want to hug you and kiss you and hold you so tight, \_

\_ And if Darkness comes, we'll win every fight. \_"

"Blimey!" declared Bianca.

"I concur," said Cheren. "The chances of this girl who came from out of nowhere on Route 1 being such a poet..."

"Two billion, three hundred and seventy-four million, seven hundred and fifty-five thousand, one hundred and thirteen to one against," sighed Stacey.

"\_ I loveth thy face, thy hair so bright orange, \_

\_ Th'art sweet and so fresh, just like a fine lozenge. \_

\_ I know I shan't fear, nor ever regret \_

\_ That I'm a lesbian, and you and I met. \_"

Whitney fell silent, the joy of a completed poem mingling with the additional joy of having a girlfriend and the worry that Stacey wouldn't like it.

"That... that was..." breathed Stacey, "not quite Shakespeare, but you put more emotion into it than he ever managed, except perhaps in that sonnet he wrote for Anne Hathaway. But I digress!" She threw her arms around Whitney. They snogged each other passionately and at length enough to get this story's age rating bumped up to T, so perhaps I'd better gloss over the details.

"Ah, young love..." said Cheren wistfully.

"Why couldn't Elesa be my age?" said Blake ruefully.

"I think I might give Tabitha a call," Cheren decided.

"I wonder if Elesa has a teenage daughter..." Blake pondered.

"I don't see the point in falling in love, to be honest," said Bianca. "I'd much rather go swimming. Hey, can we go swimming?!"

"Well, there isn't much water on Route 7," said Cheren unsurely. "But maybe."

"Yay!" said Bianca.

A sudden warm gust of wind made the three look around in shock, but nothing seemed to come of it.

"We've got stuff to do before any swimming, Bianca," Blake pointed out. "Pokémon to research, practice for the next gym battle... And let's not forget-"

Shadow Ho-oh and Shadow Lugia careened into view, landing heavily on the grass. Immediately, soldiers were pouring off their backs and looking for things to injure. Cheren took the initiative, Bianca leapt into action and Blake was just plain furious.

"Oh, come on! Must you people ruin everything?!" demanded Blake, shaking his fist at the two shadow pokémon. "I mean, this is the most pathetic excuse for a cliffhanger I've ever laid eyes on!"

## 27. Chapter 27: Excitement Happens

**\*\*~Author's Note~\*\***

To the anonymous guest reviewer who's been reviewing this story at great length: Thanks a bunch. Your comments brighten my day, and make me feel as if writing is even more worthwhile than I previously believed it to be (which is saying something).

This chapter wasn't very easy to write, though, so I no doubt deserve more anonymous reviews for finally completing it. Some money, cake and fan letters would be nice, too; please send all your donations to [REDACTED].

**\*\*~Chapter Twenty-seven: Aldith, Neoplasm and the Reluctant Scolipede: A Battle to Remember~\*\***

On the one hand, two shadow pokémon, wielders of immense power. Eight human fighters dressed in black, each with a sword, a plasma rifle and who knows what else. Countless vicious-looking pokémon.

On the other hand, one Knight of Aura (ish), one preposterously cheerful girl, one kind of reformed snooty-pants and many pokémon.

Such was what Blake Stormheart perceived around him. He knew immediately what had to be done.

"RUN!" shouted Blake, and, grabbing Bianca by the hand and Cheren by the scarf, he ran for it. Bolts of sizzling blue stuff struck the

grass around them, somehow missing every time, and an aeroblast almost removed Bianca's beret.

"That rock!" panted Cheren, struggling to do his scarf up again on the fly. "Behind! Hurry!" Now seizing the initiative, he grasped Blake by the burgeoning ponytail and set about dragging him over to the tall, rugged boulder. Bianca ran after them as best she could.

"Why the boulder?!" demanded Blake.

"Can't run forever!" Cheren pointed out.

Blake felt as if he could manage at least another ten minutes, but hiding behind a boulder did have its merits. The ground rose a little around the boulder, pebbles rising up from the earth to greet their oncoming feet, but the three had little trouble bundling themselves into a small, slightly damp hollow at the rear. They sat in silence for a few moments, broken only by Bianca yelping plaintively after sitting on a sharp stone.

"Well, here we are," said Cheren finally.

"We are here," agreed Bianca. "Where are Whitney and Stacey?"

"By the river, I think," replied Blake. "They're probably all right..."

"They could find a good boulder at the very least," said Cheren confidently. "Talking of which..." he gestured to their own boulder, "ideas, anyone?"

They spent a minute or so deep in thought. Without Zephyr or Rashimo or anyone, fighting seemed quite risky, and there was no way they could just leave without being-

A thunderbolt crashed down right by Blake's shoe. With a monstrous howl, a manectric leapt clean over the boulder, switching direction in midair to land with a resounding thump right in front of the three friends. There was fire in its eyes and pain on its breath, and the very air seemed charged. It was charged, but that's beside the point.

"Rude," commented Bianca.

"Agreed. Look here, fair manectric, what's your business with the... um... Ghetsis's gang? Don't you know they're evil?" said Cheren sternly.

"\_Our name is Team Neoplasm,\_" growled the manectric, "\_and as to evil, I shan't dignify that with a response. Prepare to die!\_"

The manectric pounced, sparks building up around his teeth. Seeing his intent, Cheren swung his staff right into the manectric's jaw. The manectric bit the staff clean in half, but lost a couple of teeth in the process. His eyes not once leaving Cheren, the manectric took a few steps back, gathering his energy for the next attack.

Which was just as well, since, while the manectric was concentrating on Cheren, Blake and Bianca had not been idle.

"Aura sphere!" shouted Blake, loosing a sphere of Aura into the manectric's flank.

"Book on the head!" agreed Bianca, whacking the manectric with her copy of "How to Train your Dragonite".

Glaring down at the subdued manectric, Cheren got straight to the point. "You may tell your brothers-" Bianca gave Cheren a meaningful nudge. "You may tell your partners in evil this: whenever evil should rear its head in Unova, Cheren, Bianca, Blake, Whitney, Zephyr, Rashimo, Durant, Stacey and countless others will be there to stop it! Clear?!"

The manectric gave a short, barking laugh, as a menacing shadow passed over himself and everyone nearby. "\_Good speech, you meddling brat. Now look up.\_"

"Look up?! I think not," scoffed Cheren. "It's not as if anything interesting could be up there."

"Uh, Cheren-" began Bianca.

"Shut up. As I was saying, we won't idly suffer your so-called Team so-called Neoplasm. Truth, ideals, teamwork, friendship, equality and the Unovan way! Those are what we believe in, and those are for what we shall stand," ranted Cheren. "The peace and prosperity of this region have been unchallenged for years, except that time the power station exploded, and I do not intend to let that change."

"Seriously, there's-" began Blake.

"Will you put a sock in it?! I'm trying to... oh."

Cheren looked up, then up some more, and cringed. There, perched menacingly on top of the boulder, stood Shadow Ho-oh.

"...We can work with this," said Cheren, hoping it would be true. He took a few steps back. "Snorlax, I choose you!"

Snorlax burst into existence, shaking the ground as she landed and almost toppling Shadow Ho-oh off the boulder. She'd had plenty of food and sleep, so Cheren knew she'd have both the strength and courage to stand up to the corrupted phoenix.

"I concur." Bianca turned her beret the other way round and retrieved a poké-ball. "Floella, let's go!"

Another flash of light heralded the materialisation of Floella, her soft pink limbs waving in the breeze.

"Georgina, I choose you!" Blake finished, releasing the mighty boldore. Taking her place beside Snorlax, Georgina glared defiantly up at Shadow Ho-oh.

For his part, Shadow Ho-oh looked as if he might laugh if he wasn't already bored to tears by his enemies. "\_You people head for Mistralton City and the tower. I'll handle this,\_" he declared, glancing over his shoulder. "\_Now, who faints first?!\_"



"Him. Hydro pump!" ordered Bianca.

"Rock slide!" agreed Blake.

"Body slam!" commanded Cheren.

Several gallons of water, a hundredweight of boulders and half a tonne of Snorlax slammed into Shadow Ho-oh, sending him reeling. Catching himself in mid-reel, the shadow pok  mon spread his wings and leapt into the air, purple flames spreading across his feathers.

"\_Duck!\_" shouted Georgina, calling up a protect shield around herself as she leapt into the air. The onrushing wall of sacred fire spilled around her, washing over everyone who hadn't ducked enough and singeing the ground behind them. The boulder glowed red-hot where the fire had struck it.

"That smarts..." said Bianca, gingerly feeling her singed dress.

"\_Seconded,\_" said Snorlax, her voice strained by pain. "\_I really need some ice cream... and a nap...\_"

"Later," Cheren promised. "Hyper beam, if you'd be so kind."

Snorlax's eyes flashed bright red and two beams of blindingly bright fire poured out onto Shadow Ho-oh, spilling out across his belly. Screeching in pain, the shadow pok  mon dove down at Snorlax, talons at the ready for some serious maiming.

"Oh, no he isn't... won't. Will going to not. Uh, stone edge!" commanded Blake.

Georgina nodded grimly, then drove her front feet into the ground, sending the boulder flying up at Shadow Ho-oh. It hit him in just the right place, shoving him off-course and sending him crashing to the ground behind Snorlax.

"Mmfl! Fmmflmfllllg!" screamed Cheren, badly muffled, trying in vain to crawl out from under the fallen pok  mon.

"\_Hold on! I'll get you out!\_" declared Snorlax, and, grasping Shadow Ho-oh by the tail, she heaved him off Cheren.

"Thanks a bunch," said Cheren shakily. "I think he's still conscious, though."

"In which case, water pulse!" ordered Bianca. Floella hurled a water pulse at Shadow Ho-oh, catching him right on the head.

"\_Aaaargh! You people are seriously beginning to tick me off,\_" growled Shadow Ho-oh, carefully readjusting his crest. "\_Let's see how you handle this!\_"

He slammed both his wings into the ground. There was a colossal rumble, the earth beneath everyone's feet started to wobble like jelly, and the boulder shattered into tiny fragments. Everyone except

Snorlax was sent tumbling by the earthquake, particularly Georgina, who fainted.

Blake came shakily to his feet, retrieving Georgina's poké-ball.  
"You fought well, Georgina. Return."

She returned gladly.

"Quick, use hydro pump again!" ordered Bianca, helping Floella up (although how a floating pokémon could be damaged by an earthquake is beyond me). Floella spat out another stream of water, soaking Shadow Ho-oh to the skin. Blake threw in a few water pulses to really seal the deal.

"He's looking quite forlorn now, don't you think?" commented Cheren.  
"Thus, hyper beam!"

Snorlax loosed another hyper beam at Shadow Ho-oh, who took it head-on, then flopped to the ground. With a final groan of "\_Kiss me, Lugia!\_", he fainted.

It took a few moments for the fact that the Magnificent Many had won to sink in.

"...Well," said Cheren, "we've done it. 'Tis a poor victory, though, for we battled not for a good time, but for survival itself."

"What are you talking about?! That was wicked!" declared Blake.

"I knew you had it in you, Floella!" squealed Bianca, hugging Floella.

"Lish frillish," said Floella, blushing a little. "Frill frillish lish."

"I can only hope Durant and the two lovebirds fared as well as we did..." said Blake gravely, neatly setting up the next scene.

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, wow! This is the best river in the world!" squealed Whitney. Her wellies and most of her trousers were plastered with mud, every bit of her was soaked to the skin, and the thick mud beside the river was so churned-up with footprints it looked like a mudkip colony. Whitney was having the time of her life, practically glowing with joy.<p>

"I know, right? I've never had so much fun calculating the density of mud before!" agreed Stacey, who was not nearly as mucky as the other.  
"Durant, I think we may have misjudged mud."

"\_You don't rust,\_" Durant pointed out.

"True. Anyway, I'd say this particular bit of mud has a density of approximately 1.76 grammes per cubic centimetre. Quite thick; a higher density would indicate a higher water content, which would make it wetter," Stacey continued.

"I like wet mud the best, so dense is probably good," Whitney pointed out. She only a vague idea what Stacey was drivelling on about, but

it seemed like a valid point.

"Uh-huh," Stacey acknowledged.

A sudden gust of wind caught their attention for a moment, ruffling Stacey's hair and clothes and blow-drying Whitney a little.

"...Anyway, do you mind if I measure the surface areas of your feet?" asked Stacey, once she was satisfied the wind wasn't anything to do with a mighty shadow pokémon careening towards them.

"Sure. Go ahead," said Whitney, seating herself on a relatively dry patch and showing Stacey her feet. Stacey retrieved her ruler and took a few measurements of Whitney's boot soles, then washed her ruler, then washed her hands.

"Well?" said Whitney.

"You've got pretty normal feet. The surface area of your left foot is-

Another, stronger gust of wind blew past the two girls and one durant, making ripples in the river. A few of the more sensitive pokémon around the place retreated into their nests.

"I don't like this wind," said Whitney. "It's not natural. No, definitely not a natural wind. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say it was unnatural!"

"Very witty," said Stacey. "Anyway, if you stand in the mud for a bit and let me measure how far you sink, I'll be able to calculate your weight to within a tenth of a miligramme."

"Well, why not?" Whitney stepped into some mud, and sank a little.

"Good choice of mud. Let's see, now-"

A sudden blast of wind blew Stacey's ruler out of her hand and straight into the swamiest bit of river.

"Crumbs!" was all Stacey could think to say.

"I'll get it," offered Whitney, retrieving the ruler and wiping it on one of the cleaner bits of her top. Her mind was not on the ruler, though, but the wind. "Really, now, those gusts..."

As if on cue, another gust of wind blew over them, this time almost toppling Whitney.

"I think I've got it. It must be pokémon acting up. Wingbeats, maybe?" proposed Stacey, offering Whitney a steadying hand.

Whitney raised an eyebrow. "That's a little far-fetched. The only pokémon with wings big enough for this would be Shadow Lugia, and we beat her last time, didn't we?"

With a howl as great and terrifying as a coastal storm, her wings calling up a hurricane like unto another coastal storm, Shadow Lugia

descended upon the sloping grass beside the river, landing with an almighty, earth-shaking crash, kind of like some of the more violent storms. Four humans clad all in black leapt from her back, swords, poké-balls and plasma rifles visible on their belts, and four more could be seen coming to an exhausted halt beside her. She really needed to learn about slowing down.

Whitney just had time to whisper "I stand corrected" before a hail of plasma blasts were pelting her, Stacey and Durant.

"Owww..." Stacey, gingerly checking herself for burns.

"It smarts," agreed Whitney, wincing a little.

"\_Good thing I know light screen,\_" Durant piped up.

Whitney took a quick look at their attackers: Shadow Lugia, eight humans, many as-yet-unseen pokémon... reasonable odds. "Just what do you think you're doing, landing beside a river and shooting innocent people?!"

"We serve Lord Ghetsis, and all who stand in our way will be annihilated," one of the group replied. She was a woman in her early thirties, quite fit and well-built, and she had dark skin and hair. "I am Aldith, daughter of Frannie, First Warmistress of Team Neoplasm. I believe you already know Shadow Lugia, and this lot will gladly introduce themselves to you when we defeat you." She unsheathed her sword. "Send forth all pokémon!"

Aldith and her chums retrieved and activated their poké-balls, releasing forty rather mean-looking pokémon.

"This isn't good..." said Stacey, shooting Whitney a nervous look.

"I know. Cheren, Bianca and Blake got the cushy job," said Whitney ruefully. "Still, I'm the Hero of Ideals, and you're the Durant of, um, fortitude!" she declared, giving Durant an encouraging look. "And Stacey, you're the... er..."

"Hero of Mental Agility?" offered Stacey.

"Sure!" said Whitney.

"If you're quite finished," said Aldith heavily. "Charge!"

The pokémon charged.

\* \* \*

><p>"It's a lovely day, don't you think?" said Melissa. "Makes you want to head out and stomp around until you cause an earthquake..."<p>

"You were never this focused on heavy footfalls before," said N, slightly confused. "And, in case you've forgotten, I still have a broken kneecap."

"Well, some fresh air should do you good," Melissa pointed out. "That's my professional opinion as Grand Marshal."

N nodded wearily, making a spirited attempt to prop himself up on his elbows. He stiffened, screamed, and flopped back down on the bed. "Ughhh..." he groaned. "My back..."

"Didn't they just finish healing your broken back?" asked Melissa.

"No, just the nerves. My vertebrae are totalled," groaned N. "I'll be here for at least another week."

"Oh. I'm so sorry." This was hardly the life for the king of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation. How could anyone lead such a large organization from a hospital bed?! "Well, I... I suppose, um..."

Heidi's tail (which was all she could get through the door) tapped Melissa on the shoulder.

"What? Can't this wait?" asked Melissa, turning her attention to Heidi.

"\_Not really. There's a battle going on outside the city.\_"

"Oh. Well, if it's between mature, consenting pokÃ©mon-"

"\_It's Ghetsis's people,\_" said Heidi impatiently. "\_There's forty or so pokÃ©mon ganging up on two humans and a durant.\_"

"WHAT?!" Melissa glanced over at N. "This won't take a minute."

She rushed out to the hallway, where all of Heidi could just about squeeze in. "Just pokÃ©mon?"

"\_No. There are some rather nasty-looking humans egging them on,\_" said Heidi.

Melissa swore loudly and descriptively. "That Ghetsis... he makes me want to crush a watermelon with my bare hands. One hand! Or just a finger! Where are these people?!"

"\_On Route Seven,\_" replied Heidi.

"Then let's get the others and kick their hindportions!" suggested Melissa. "But, wait a minute... how do you know?"

"\_A little birdy told me,\_" replied Heidi, gesturing to a braviary perched on a nearby post box.

"Oh, great! Fight you with us, young Braviary?" asked Melissa.

"\_Of course!\_" replied Braviary. "\_Anything for Whitney and her chums.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"Aiyeeee!" Whitney eloquently screamed, falling to her knees in pain as a thunderbolt lashed through her.<p>

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" agreed Stacey, who was being battered by bullet

seeds.

"\_That smarts,\_" commented Durant, who was being stomped on by a throh. "\_Shouldn't the two of you send out some more pokÃ©mon?\_"

"They've all fainted," said Whitney dolefully. "We can't keep this up, can we? Retreating's probably our best bet."

"Good point, hence why I've kept one pokÃ©mon in reserve. Flygon, I choose you!" declared Stacey, releasing the large, graceful desert dragon. The enemy pokÃ©mon relented in their relentless assault for a few seconds, then, deciding they could take Flygon easily, charged.

"Get on! Quick!" shouted Stacey. "Flygon, we need to be anywhere else but here."

"\_You got it,\_" said Flygon confidently. "\_Is Durant on?\_"

"Just about," replied Whitney, clambering onto Flygon's back with Durant held firmly in her arms.

"\_Great. Onwards!\_" declared Flygon, leaping into the air.

"Oh, no he didn't... won't... will going to not. After that flygon! First one to hit him gets extra cheesecake!" ordered one of the Team Neoplasm warriors. As one, the Neoplasm group's flying-type pokÃ©mon took off after Flygon.

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh... that's not good," commented Blake. Just visible in the distance, Whitney, Stacey and Durant were being pummeled.<p>

"Indeed not. We must make haste!" declared Cheren, and he charged at the Neoplasm agents with renewed vigour.

"Last one there's a rotten egg!" shouted Bianca, sprinting off after Cheren.

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh my days, the speed! Flygon, you're awesome!" declared Whitney. Hanging onto Stacey with one hand and Durant with the other, being blow-dried by the wind of their flight, Whitney was having the time of her life. There were still some important considerations to take into account, though. "Er... we can outrun them, can't we?"<p>

Stacey glanced back at the attack wing of unfezants and swoobats. "'Course we can! I estimate no more than a 15.247% chance of any enemy pokÃ©mon catching up. Flygon's the fastest pokÃ©mon ever to cross the skies!"

"\_Except Rayquaza,\_" Durant pointed out. "\_And certain garchomps.\_"

"\_Do you want to be dropped?\_" asked Flygon, shooting Durant a murderous look.

Durant meekly shook his head.

"\_Well, don't mention garchomps around me! My kind were the first ground-dragon-types, and do we get the fame, the mega evolutions?! No, and that Cynthia lady isn't helping!\_"

Stacey sighed. "Someday, your kind will take their rightful place among the pseudo-legendaries, mega evolve, be some great champion's signature pokÃ©mon, etcetera, but right now we're being chased. A little concentration wouldn't go amiss."

"\_I know, I know...\_" said Flygon grumpily.

\* \* \*

><p>"In the name of the House of McTavish, cease and desist! Unhand our-" Cheren's righteous tirade was cut short by a barrage of plasma bolts sending him sprawling.<p>

"Oh, my stars..." groaned Cheren, seeing plenty.

"They've escaped, you silly sausage," Bianca pointed out, noticing the distinct lack of teenage girls and a young adult durant amid the Neoplasm pokÃ©mon. "There's no-one for the bad guys to unhand."

More blasts of superheated, energetic stuff launched Bianca head-over-heels.

"We know of your so-called Magnificent so-called Many, you meddling brats," Aldith sneered. "Shadow Ho-oh may be indisposed at present-"

"That was us!" declared Bianca, who recovered quickly.

"Shut it! As I was saying, Shadow Ho-oh may be indisposed at present, but it will be the work of a moment for us to-"

Blake punched Aldith in the face.

"\_The nerve! Attack someone in mid-monologue?!\_" gasped Shadow Lugia. "\_In the name of Ghetsis, we shall avenge our beloved Aldith! Attack!\_"

"What do you mean "avenge"?! I'm still standing, aren't I?!" demanded Aldith, but it was lost in the ensuing battle-cry. Forty-odd voices rose up in fury, some shouting the names of their species, others just generally shouting, and, gleefully encouraged by their human colleagues, the pokÃ©mon charged.

Blake knew he'd only have a split second to make any tactical decisions (again), but now that he was a mature, capable lad with character development, that would be enough. He retrieved his rolling pin and a couple of pokÃ©-balls.

"Samantha and Lilly, I choose you!"

The mighty samurott and very furry stoutland materialised with a flash of light, laying fiercely into the onrushing enemies. With the enemy pokÃ©mon distracted, Blake leapt over their heads, raising his

rolling pin high as he descended on Aldith and company.

"Wrong idea..." sighed Cheren, wincing as Blake fell under yet another barrage of plasma. Three mean-looking liepards, a darumaka, a zebstrika and a rather reluctant scolipede quickly surrounded him.

\* \* \*

><p>Smoke, dustclouds, flashes of light, stray bits of plasma and lots of elemental attacks were flaring up behind Flygon, and the flock of Neoplasm pokÃ©mon chasing him were breaking off.<p>

"Look! They're breaking off!" cried Whitney, tugging Stacey's sleeve. "Someone's attacking Aldith and her mates."

"\_Alternatively, I'm too fast for them,\_" said Flygon smugly.

"Either way, we'd better go back," decided Stacey. "We've softened the enemies up a little- 54.236%, I think- but they've still got Shadow Lugia. About turn, Flygon!"

Flygon wheeled through the air, U-turning so hard Whitney almost fell off, and launched himself at Team Neoplasm.

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, no! Blake!" gasped Bianca, utterly horrified. "Cheren, do something!"<p>

"\_...Aren't you supposed to be a strong female character? Y'know, a role model to any of the girls reading this story?\_" Templeton pointed out.

"Oh, right. I forgot," said Bianca sheepishly. Taking a deep breath, she reversed her beret and threw Perdita's pokÃ©ball at Blake's feet. It split open as soon as it touched the ground, releasing Perdita. She glared defiantly at the surrounding enemies, all the usual pomp and haughtiness of a liepard supplemented by the fact that, deep down, she actually had a conscience.

"Thanks a bunch," said Blake shakily.

"\_Oh, look what the cat dragged in! Namely herself,\_" said a tall liepard, looking down his nose at Perdita. "\_A plain girl like you is clearly miles outside her league. Why don't you just kiss my feet by way of apology and be off with yourself?\_"

Perdita sniffed. "\_An oaf like you has no right even to look me in the eye. I am Perdita, daughter of... someone, and I will guard this boy with my life.\_"

"Thanks an additonal bunch!" repeated Blake. "Hear that, Bianca?! You really brought her up well!"

"Little busy right now!" was all Bianca could reply, beleagured as she was by Shadow Lugia's relentless aeroblasts.

"\_No-one brought me up,\_" growled Perdita, shooting Blake a murderous look. "\_I just happen to prefer Bianca and your good self to the



company of these cut-price mercenaries and privateers, so unworthy of being called pokÃ©mon.\_"

The scolipede burst into tears.

"\_Oh, grow a spine!\_" snapped the lead liepard, kicking the scolipede.

"\_Why is this happening to me?! I never wanted to fight!\_" wailed the scolipede.

"\_Will you shut it?! You'll have us all in solitary confinement!\_" shouted the zebstrika. "\_You know we get beaten to within an inch of our lives whenever we express anything less than complete loyalty to Team Neoplasm and enthusiasm about violence!\_"

That was new to Blake, but not altogether surprising. "I can't let this go on. The truth has its boots on, and shall run down the lies."

"\_...What?\_" asked Perdita.

"Darren, I choose you!" shouted Blake, ignoring her. "Samantha, Lilly, cover us. Darren, we're going after their dread masters of doom and stuff!"

"\_You got it!\_" grinned Darren, on fire as soon as he materialised. "\_Flame charge?\_"

"Yep," Blake confirmed.

Darren bowled through the enemy ranks, fires roaring up in his wake. Letting his qi flow into his feet, Blake was after Darren like a shot, boosted and kept from burning by a powerful hydro pump.

"\_You can thank me later!\_" Samantha shouted after him.

There was no time to contemplate which was was up or down or who he was or what he was doing; Blake pounced on the nearest Neoplasm agent, sky uppercutting her on the chin. By the sound of it, she ended up biting her tongue when she landed. In a split second, Aldith was pointing her plasma rifle right at Blake's face. Undaunted, Blake grabbed the barrel and pulled. Aldith pulled back. Blake pulled harder. Aldith pulled harder. Blake heaved, then, just when Aldith was getting the better of him (she had some Aura talent of her own), he pushed with all his might.

Taken completely by surprise, Aldith flumped onto her back, her arms momentarily limp. Triumphant, Blake snatched her plasma rifle and set about stunning those few Neoplasm agents Darren hadn't clobbered already, then gave Aldith a decisive whack on the head.

"Victory is ours! Yahoo!" Blake eloquently summed up. He was out of breath, bruised, plasma-stained and euphoric; nothing like a good punch-up to get the blood flowing.

"I concur!" said Cheren proudly.

"Yay!" agreed Bianca.

"You're all idiots," said Aldith sourly. She had quite a hard head, so Blake hadn't quite knocked her out. "As long as Shadow Lugia still stands, there can be no victory against Team Neoplasm!"

"About that..." said Whitney, leaning nonchanaltly against the unconscious Shadow Lugia.

"Uh... we've still got our pokÃ©mon! Get over here and fight for me, you pack of ingratiates!" shouted Aldith.

"\_Goodbye, then,\_" said the Reluctant Scolipede, wandering off to the nearest forest.

"\_Lovely meeting you! 'Bye!\_" Perdita called after him.

Aldith spent a few moments in silent contemplation, then burst into tears.

\* \* \*

><p>"I demand protective custody! Ghetsis'll kill me!" shouted Aldith, grabbing the local Officer Jenny by the collar as soon as she arrived.<p>

"...I'll see what I can do," replied Jenny, gently but firmly retrieving her collar.

"\_Whitney! Thank heavens you're all right!\_" declared Braviary, throwing her wings around Whitney.

"What are we, then? Chopped liver?" asked Bianca.

"Shut up," Cheren advised her.

"\_Where do you want the rejuvenation machine?\_" one of the people carrying it enquired of Nurse Joy.

"Anywhere there," the nurse replied, gesturing to the cluster of soundly clobbered Neoplasm pokÃ©mon. The three audinos set the machine down on a reasonably flat patch of grass.

"I trust the fact that these pokÃ©mon were coerced into fighting will be taken into account," said Melissa icily. "And that you'll take your turn carrying the machine."

"...Of course. What do you take me for?" said Nurse Joy.

\* \* \*

><p>Cleaning up after such a large and violent battle is a long, complicated process, and it would take me a whole chapter to cover everything; just counselling the injured pokÃ©mon would be enough for a few pages. Suffice it to say that all went well, and, as night fell, Zephyr and Rashimo finally saw fit to show up.<p>

"I know, I know..." grunted Zephyr, skulking over to Bianca, Stacey, Whitney, Cheren and Blake's bed. (There were two to a bunk, and Whitney was sleeping under the bed.)

Blake, in particular, was hoping to do nothing but sleep, so what he

said next wasn't entirely up to his usual standard. "Where the hell were you?!"

"You could've made the battle a lot less labour-intensive!" Bianca scolded the two.

"I know!" repeated Zephyr.

"So what happened?" asked Cheren.

"...I know what happened, rest assured," said Zephyr.

Blake swore some more.

Cheren sighed. "Do keep a lid on the profanity, Blake, old shoe. It can easily become a habit."

"You haven't really answered our questions, either. Where were you?!" Whitney insisted, slightly muffled by the bed. "Zephyr, you represent the truth. Tell us everything."

"I decline to," said Zephyr haughtily.

It was now Whitney's turn to utilise some descriptive language, a task she undertook with gusto.

"Well, if that's your attitude... she got her feet tangled up in a tennis net," said Rashimo matter-of-factly.

"Y-you didn't have to tell them!" protested Zephyr, her face reddening. "It was enemy action! They threw the net at me!"

"After you threatened to zap the umpire into oblivion," Rashimo reminded her.

"He hit me with a racquette!" retorted Zephyr.

"You knocked him off his chair," said Rashimo calmly.

"He...!" Zephyr's rationalisation came to a juddering halt. "He... he ticked me off."

"If you're supposed to be the embodiment of truth, I'm a flamingo," said Blake grumpily, thrusting his head under the pillow. "Goodnight, all."

It was a couple of hours before anyone spoke, a period Bianca spent deep in thought. Something her friend had said made no sense whatsoever; so little sense, not even her permanently whimsical brain could cope with it. There was nothing else for it. She'd have to ask, waking everyone up and risking their ire in the process.

"'Scuse me, what's a flamingo?"

## 28. Chapter 28: Bianca Turns Into a Giantess

**\*\*~Author's Note~\*\***

Over the past several months, I've made a lot of minor edits and a



which an enormous drop of clear blue mucus hung in the air. "Although we \_might\_ kind of be in Unova, actually, so, um..."

"Cubchoo! Choo cub!" said the cubchoo cheerfully, inadvertantly showering a passing deerling with mucus.

"Ling deer!" the deerling protested, staring in horror at what had become of her beautiful green fur. Her summer form was her favourite. With a cry of fury, the deerling lashed out with her front hooves, knocking the cubchoo head-over-heels.

Bianca couldn't bear it. "Stop it! Stop it! He's just a cub, he doesn't know any better!"

"Ling deerling!" retorted the deerling, powering up an energy ball between her antlers.

"You wouldn't!" said Bianca fiercely.

The deerling stuck her tongue out, then loosed the energy ball at the cubchoo, striking him right in the soft, fluffy, huggable tummy. After carefully weighing up his options, the cubchoo made a run for it.

"...You would," said Bianca, barely speaking above a whisper. "Well then, in the name of the Moon, I must punish you. Sailor Templeton, I choose you!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Now to Item Twelve on our agenda! With Bianca off frolicking with a cubchoo, we shall need a replacement 'dex holder," said Cheren, his confident, leaderly tones in perfect contrast to his bored audience. "Now, there is precisely one among us-"<p>

"I'd love to do it!" declared Stacey.

"...Great! Here's Bianca's pokÃ©dex," said Cheren, trying not to look too put-out as he handed over the device. "Do not take this for a mere loan, however; pokÃ©dexes are the most technologically advanged devices to be found outside of the International Space Station-"

"Available for free to all halfway-decent pokÃ©mon trainers," Stacey cut in.

Cheren pursed his lips, then thought better of it and unpursed them.

Blake put his hand up. "Why've you got Bianca's pokÃ©dex, anyway?"

"Do you think I'd trust her and that snot fountain with it?"

"Good point," said Blake. "Haughty, but well-made and... pointy."

Satisfied, Cheren gestured to a patch of tall grass, almost waist-high. "Our mission today is to study amoonguses, cubchoos and sawsbucks. There should be plenty of pokÃ©mon there. Come

alon-

"Done it," said Stacey, holding Bianca's pok dex proudly aloft.

For once in agreement, Cheren and Blake were struck dumb.

"Er... what?" asked Cheren.

"Come again?" said Blake.

"I've done it. The pok dex entries for amoongi, cubchoos and sawsbucks. I also updated the one for basculins," Stacey elaborated. "Bianca really can't spell, can she?"

Blake blinked.

"...Well, good for you," said Cheren.

Blake blinked a second time.

"However, we still need footage of the pok mon," Cheren went on, rallying magnificently. "Come along, chaps."

"I'm not a-

"Oh, just get moving!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Let's see... Nice, long, curvy mandibles..." muttered Whitney, carefully applying some more mud to her Durant sculpture. It was pretty decent, albeit with rather thick legs, and Durant was more than happy to model for it.<p>

"Y'know, Whitney," Rashimo commented, wandering over from his boulder (the perfect place for a legendary pok mon to sit and muse), "there's somethin' profoundly idealistic about sculptification."

"Uh-huh," said Whitney, not really listening.

"Do tell," said Zephyr po-facedly.

"I shall." Rashimo took a deep breath. "You, Whitney, are convertin' basic stuff- clay, in this case- into an image. Something greater, more profound, y'know? Ye've taken the ideal of Durant out of that thing between yer ears, inserted it into the clay-

Zephyr raised a hoof. "Stop right there. If anything, Whitney has recreated the truth of Durant. His shape, his attitude, his general demeanour, his size... Everything but his soul, his materials, his mind, his inner workings and some other stuff, Whitney has copied. 'Tis a monument to the truth; every facet of a fine young Durant, as best one person can interpret him."

Rashimo snorted. "I swear, Zephie, yer gettin' more pretentious every day."

"And you grow more down-to-earth with every passing moment," Zephyr retorted.

"I'm sorry, can you keep it down? I'm trying to sculpt here," said Whitney testily.

"We will not," replied Zephyr, raising her nose heavenwards. "It's strange; one would expect the embodiment of Ideals to be every bit as perfect- sorry, pretentious- as I am, or at least try."

"Well, if yer so truthful, why can't ye just be yerself?" retorted Rashimo. "No need t' ponce around an' stand on ceremony, what?"

"...You're an idiot, Rashimo," sniffed Zephyr.

"You too, sis," said Rashimo amiably.

"For Giratina's sake, will you please SHUT UP?!" roared Whitney.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hi, Whitney! How was..." Stacey's face fell as she caught sight of Whitney's scowling face and severely charred clothes.<p>

"This happened," said Whitney ruefully, tipping some shattered lumps of clay onto the ground at Stacey's feet. "In other news, punching the "Daughter of the Storm" in the nose is a bad decision."

"Ad don't you go forgettig id!" said Zephyr nasally.

"Ooookaaay..." said Stacey.

\* \* \*

><p>"We've completed our research, no thanks to you," said Cheren superciliously, handing Bianca her pokÃ©dex.<p>

"Brilliant! Something interesting happened to me, too. After Templeton beat up that deerling the cubchoo gave him this magical growth formula but he didn't want it so he said I could have it!" declared Bianca. After a little digging around in her pocket, she retrieved a small plastic bottle. "It's made from water, honey, oran berries, ground-up lapis lazuli, caulliflower, and some other secret ingredient. Cubchoos and beartics use it to grow big and strong."

Cheren, Blake, Whitney, Stacey, Zephyr, Rashimo and Durant gave the growth formula a dubious look. It was a grainy blue syrup with little pieces of caulliflower floating around in it.

"Okay. We need to analyse this substance before anyone does anything foolish. Where's the nearest laboratory?" asked Stacey, taking the lead.

Completely ignoring her, Bianca opened the bottle and took a little sip.

"I think there's one back in Mistralton City, but we can't just keep backtracking. We should ask Professor Juniper," suggested Blake.

"Ooh! It's salty and sweet and caulliflowery all at the same time!" cried Bianca, and she gulped down the entire bottle.

"I don't think we need to worry too much," said Whitney. "I mean, all we need to analyse it is a microscope, some litmus paper, some sodium hydroxide, an X-ray machine, a magnet, some ammonium sulphate, some barium chloride, a dash of copper sulphate, some test tubes, a source of heat, a fractional distillation thingy-"

"Aiyeeee!" wailed Bianca, undergoing a sudden growth spurt.

\* \* \*

><p>A few rather eventful minutes passed.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"Gee, I hope I don't step on anyone," said Bianca worriedly. "It's a risk, though. You all look so tiny down there."<p>

"Bianca, dear girl, you are 24.5 millimetres taller," said Stacey heavily. "Or one inch, if you prefer."

"Don't be silly. I'm a giant!" retorted Bianca.

"You look exactly the same," said Cheren wearily. "Now can we all just concentrate on hiking to Icirrus City?"

"Okay," agreed Bianca, with a good-natured shrug. "But, y'know, I could easily leave you all behind, what with being so humungous. Does anyone want to ride on my shoulders?"

"Ah..." said Cheren.

"How about no?" asked Whitney.

"Maybe if we get tired," said Blake noncomittally.

Bianca shrugged. "Suit yourselves."

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, wow! This grass feels so wonderful and tickly!" giggled Bianca. She'd taken off her shoes and socks to feel the grass between her toes.<p>

\_My foot\_, Cheren reflected, glancing up at the sturdy, almost wooden-looking blades of grass towering over their heads. Some patches were so dense Durant had to cut them a path.

"\_Aiyeeee! Oh, Zekrom, it hurts!\_" wailed Durant.

Zephyr gave him a look. "One does not lightly speak the name of the Dragon of Truth."

...Some patches were so dense not even Durant could cut through them.

"What?! What is it?!" cried Blake, rushing to Durant's side. From what he could see of it, Durant's mandibles were bent completely out



of shape.

"Oh, no! Oh, Durant, I'm so sorry!" cried Whitney, cradling her stricken steel ant in her arms. "It's..." Her voice cracked. Choking down tears, she went on, "Actually, the damage is superficial, but who cares?! We should've brought machetes!"

"The grim, realistic dangers of adventure..." said Cheren darkly, pulling his imaginary trenchcoat tight around his shoulders. "Gentlemen, we cannot tarry. Blake! Bianca! Get a stretcher for Durant. Whitney! Pull yourself together, man! Durant needs you to be strong! Stacey, put the kettle on, and don't forget the biscuits!"

"Cheren, get a move-on, will you?!" called Blake.

"...Whuh?" Cheren blinked away his fantasies, realising with rising dread that he was getting left behind. Blake was disappearing into the long grass even as he spoke. "Coming!"

\* \* \*

><p>Durant's mandibles now rested safely in a sling upcycled from Stacey's spare pinafore, which she'd bought specifically so it could double as a bandage. The rest of the party were doing their best to flatten out the grass in front of him, but it was slow going.<p>

However, as the miles marched backwards into history and the future slowly slid into the here-and-now, the grass seemed to be getting shorter. At first it had towered over the Many, but now it was dropping down to shoulder level.

"Aww... Now it's shorter than my fingernails..." said Bianca dolefully, in spite of the tufts of grass-seed tickling her under the arms.

And the grass continued to grow shorter, dropping from chest-high to waist-high to hip-high to thigh-high, gradually levelling out at knee-high. And then abruptly flattening out into a wide, gravelly riverbank.

"Now, this," said Cheren seriously, "is a river. Another river is what it is, and ford it we must, for at the other side lies... stuff... which we want to get to."

"To which we want to get," Stacey corrected him.

A roar of rushing water could easily be heard as the Magnificent Many drew near to the river. The three-foot-high reeds jutting out onto the bank were a welcome callback to the massive grasses on the plain.

"We'd better rope ourselves together," Stacey suggested, giving the deep, foaming water a nervous glance. "Maybe tie weights to our feet, too. Or just fly over, whatever works."

"I concur," said Cheren. "Whitney, get the rope out."

"Uh... I don't have any," said Whitney, bemused.

"Oh," said Cheren. "Blake, get the rope out."

"No rope here," said Blake apologetically.

"...Stacey, get the rope out," said Cheren, without much hope.

Stacey shook her head.

"Well, this is just typical," sighed Zephyr. "And I have none, before you ask."

"Me neither," said Rashimo.

Durant shook his head.

"Knickers." Cheren took a deep steadying breath. "Bianca, I don't suppose...?"

"No need!" said Bianca breezily. "When you've got legs as big as mine, you can just step over."

"What?! NO!" the entire Magnificent Many yelled as one.

There was a splash, followed by some screaming, spluttering and a plaintive cry for help.

\* \* \*

><p>"So c-c-cold..." whimpered Bianca. "I'd've th-thought my s-s-super-thick giant skin w-would've insulated me."<p>

The cheery, loveable girl was cocooned in towels, slowly warming up by the campfire.

"Well... clearly, you've shrunk," suggested Blake, who had long since given up trying to impose "reality" on Bianca.

"I can't've! Th-the bottle says it l-lasts forever!" protested Bianca.

"Give me strength..." moaned Cheren.

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning dawned warm and bright, heralding Bianca's return to full health. Her clothes were dry, her appetite was back, and she was currently juggling meteors. Or so she claimed.<p>

"Cheren's log, Saturday the fourteenth of July: We are now approximately halfway to Icirrus City. Bianca's, uh, \_condition\_ persists, but can be coped with. We have many leagues still to march, however, so persist we must," logged Cheren. "Skorupi seems close to evolving, and I have high hopes for a productive day."

Satisfied with his log, Cheren wandered over to Blake's portable kitchen, where the Hero of Truth was making some steamed rice and miso soup. "Smells delectable."

"That would be because it is delectable," Blake smirked. "Or will be. Uh, will is going to have being been."

Cheren stared at him, then, still staring, made his way over to Whitney, who was gluing her Durant sculpture back together.

"Good morning, Whitney," said Cheren amiably. "Please be careful not to spill the glue."

"Of course I won't spill it!" scoffed Whitney. "I mean, if I did that..."

"It'd be terrible," Stacey finished for her.

"I know. We'd slip in it, get hopelessly stuck, get into all sorts of hilarious jams..." said Whitney absentmindedly, as she nudged the final piece into place. "Ah, there we go!"

Stacey clapped. Durant squeaked appreciatively.

"Just gotta leave it to dry for a few hours," said Whitney thoughtfully. "Maybe if I put it in a pokÃ©-ball..."

Whitney's contemplation was interrupted by the arrival of Bianca, proudly holding a tiny sapling over her head.

"Guys, look! I'm carrying a tree!" squeaked Bianca. "Look! Look! It's a tree and I'm carrying it!"

Bianca skipped over to Whitney, who only just managed to get the sculpture out of the way before it got skipped all over. "Hey, Whitney, look! I bet not even you could carry a tree."

"What kind of tree?" asked Whitney, giving her an appraising look.

"This kind!" grinned Bianca, stepping forward.

"Yeowch!" cried Whitney. She glanced gingerly down at her feet. "Bianca... that's my foot."

Bianca gasped in horror. "Oh, no! Oh, how could I step on my friend?! Whitney, I'm so sorry!"

"No, don't worry, it's cool. I've got another foot," said Whitney levelly.

"I can't look!" wailed Bianca, choking back tears. "She's as flat as a pancake!"

"Uh..." said Whitney.

"Um..." agreed Stacey.

"You're a piece of work, Bianca," sighed Cheren, shaking his head.

"Oh, no, wait! My dad told me how to reinflate someone!" cried Bianca, sagging with relief. "You get a bicycle pump, put it in their

tummy button and-

"I hid in that big gap in the sole of your shoe, all right?!" shouted Whitney. "Look at me! I am fine! Unharmd! Unsquashed!"

Bianca fell silent.

\* \* \*

><p>Throughout the day, Bianca maintained her melancholy, not even stopping to trade a few well-meaning jibes with Cheren. The group had many miles to cover, through exceedingly tall grass and across a couple more rivers, meeting plenty of wild pok  mon and the occasional traveller, but not once did Bianca make some reference to being a giant.<p>

"This is ridiculous! She's absolutely, totally, completely and utterly milking it," Whitney complained, as the Many clambered over an outcrop of rugged brown rock large enough to keep Bianca out of earshot. "Bianca is having a hissy fit. A sulk. A strop. Mostly sulk, actually, but... d'you get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. I estimate only a 13.23836% probability that Bianca is truly convinced of being a giantess," agreed Stacey.

"That's a lot of decimal places..." Whitney commented.

"Well, I've had plenty of time to think about it," said Stacey.

Stacey was the first to crest the cliff, so their conversation had to pause while she gave Whitney a hand up. Then they helped Cheren, Blake, Bianca and Durant, and Zephyr and Rashimo jumped straight to the top.

"Nice cliff. Very cliffy," commented Cheren. "Pity about my shins."

"\_I thought it was an outcrop,\_" muttered Durant.

"Outcrop, cliff... What's the difference?!" said Whitney breezily.

Stacey drew in a deep, pedantic breath. "An outcrop, dear Whitney, is an outcrop is an outcrop is an outcrop, whereas a cliff is a cliff is a cliff..." she paused, her gaze unwavering, "is a cliff. Is that clear?"

"Uh..." said Whitney, completely bewildered. "Y'know, you're really cute when you're being pedantic."

"And you're cute when you're not," Stacey riposted. "As cute as a button."

"Well, you're as cute as two buttons put together!" grinned Whitney.

"And you're as cute as a really cute thing!" agreed Stacey. "The cutest thing since we defined the word 'cute'."

"As distinct from kawaii and adorable?" asked Whitney, tenderly taking Stacey's hands.

"They're one and the same! Oh, Whitney, I love you so!"

"I love you, Stacey!"

"...Weren't they just complaining about me?" asked Bianca.

"Maybe, maybe not. That's love for you," said Blake, with a shrug.

\* \* \*

><p>"Cheren's log, Saturday the fourteenth of July: Icirrus City lies but a few miles away, but my companions find themselves too hungry to make the last few miles." Cheren's stomach rumbled. He ignored it magnificently. "Thus, we have stopped for dinner. Bianca, thank Reshiram, has decided that she's back to normal-"<p>

"You're welcome," said Rashimo amiably.

"-although, ironically, she remains one inch taller than before. Other business: Whitney is making orange juice and Blake is preparing some sort of pizza."

"Some sort of pizza?" Blake repeated, looking up from his portable kitchen. "Some? Sort? Of? Pizza?! This, you ashen-tongued pleb, is nothing less than the pinnacle of fusion cuisine! A mix of finest Indian-style meats, spicy tomato sauce from the heart of Jamaica, baby sweetcorn and peppers roasted in oil, mouth-wateringly tender sauteed seaweed, a side of German marzipan bagels... A rich, spicy aroma, an exquisite taste, each mouthful a maelstrom of glory! This is going to be the pizza of heaven! The hyper-pizza from beyond infinity! If pizzas were pokÃ©mon, this one would be Arceus! And it's going to be delicious!"

"I think it's burning," said Whitney.

"Eep!" cried Blake, quickly returning his attention to the pizza.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Do you like pizza, Serperior?<em>" asked Samantha, idly shuffling closer to the grassy serpent. "\_I've always loved it. My mum used to make seafood pizzas out of kelp and chalk. They were delicious!\_"

"\_I've never had pizza. I hear it's generally quite good, though.\_"

"\_Oh, it is. It's like having a sandwich, except circular and cooked and without the bread on top and with lots of toppings and...\_" Samantha frowned. "\_Not really like a sandwich at all. But lovely anyway.\_"

"\_Well, it sounds good. I don't eat much human food, though,\_" Serperior pointed out.

"\_I know it doesn't look as tasty as berries, food pellets and raw meat and stuff, but humans can cook up a storm,\_" said Samantha

pointedly. "\_Or replicate up a storm, at least.\_"

"\_I guess...\_" said Serperior. "\_Anyway, once we've eaten, are you up for a battle?\_"

"\_Always!\_" Samantha confirmed. "\_Unless we're too full.\_"

"\_Good point...\_" said Serperior.

\* \* \*

><p>"Serperior, come forth and partake of our pizza!" said Cheren dramatically, tossing Serperior's pok  -ball high into the air.<p>

"And drinks," said Whitney, who'd managed to get as much orange juice soaked into her clothes as she'd coaxed into the jug. She didn't mind, though; it saved on deodorant.

Serperior and Samatha materialised right on top of each other, falling down in a heap.

"Samantha?!" cried Cheren.

"\_Um... Serperior's great company,\_" said Samantha. Realising everyone was staring at her, she went on, "\_I like pizza, don't you? It's so round and warm and lovely... Look, just don't ask, all right?!\_"

"Samantha, how, exactly-"

"\_It's a secret. Don't bother asking her,\_" said Serperior.

"...Fine."

"You can't stop us from guessing, though," said Whitney. "Let's see, now, um... Quantum tunneling!"

Serperior and Samantha shook their heads.

"Metaphasic signature transmission?" suggested Stacey.

"\_Nope,\_" said Serperior.

"Magic?" Bianca guessed.

"\_Get real,\_" said Samantha.

"Well... maybe you somehow sort of hacked your pok  -balls," offered Whitney.

"\_Um...\_" said Samantha.

"\_Gee, I don't know about you lot, but I'm starving! What say we focus all our attention on eating now?!\_" said Serperior quickly, and, without further ado, she set upon her dinner.

\* \* \*

><p>The Sun set over Route 7, letting a cool, moonlit breeze slip down over the mountains to freeze the Magnificent Many to the bone. Or at least chill them a little. And by the last light of day, they trekked the few remaining miles to Icirrus City; the city, so it is fabled, which guarded the next chapter.<p>

## 29. Chapter 29: Enter Chloe and Stuff

\*\*~Chapter Twenty-nine: Blake Falls in Love, Whitney Meets a Druddigon and Brycen Gets Creamed Several Times~\*\*

It was the height of summer, sure, and Icirrus City wasn't all that high up, but the wind blowing down from the mountains had a frigid edge sharp enough to make a paper chain out of an electric blanket. For Bianca, it was fine and dandy. For Whitney, it was bracing. For Stacey and Cheren, it was a perfect time to try out their thermal vests and leg-warmers. And for Blake, it was an opportunity to gossip with a local girl over hot chocolate.

"They say she trains alone every night, on the peak of that very mountain. I have seen her Aura split the heavens and Durant's mandibles split the earth, and Reuniclus is trying even now to split the seas..."

"Wow." The local girl's gaze lingered on the snow-dusted peak a moment longer, then returned to Blake. "How long's she been doing this?"

"Ever since we arrived, which is three days," replied Blake.

"Oh. Remind me, what's her name?"

"Whitney Blazeheart."

"Good name."

"I know. I'm Blake Stormheart, by the way. If you were wondering."

"Oh, good. I'm Chloe Vostenlorendteldenski," said the girl, offering Blake her hand. Blake shook her warmly by said hand. "Do you do Aura, Blake?"

"Well, I..." Blake absentmindedly called up a scintillating sphere of water around his other hand, smirking awesomely. "I dabble in it."

Chloe's eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

"I'm also a brilliant cook, and I kind of know how to use a boomerang," Blake went on. "Oh, and I'm the Hero of Truth."

This time, Chloe's eyes remained snugly in place, but Blake could tell she was even more impressed. "I cook too, actually," said Chloe. "Mostly baked goods, sushi and sashimi, basic fried food, and some foreign dishes like fish 'n' chips. My brothers think I could join their restaurant in a couple of years, actually, broaden the menu a little..."

"Your brothers? Wait, these wouldn't be-

"Cilan, Chili and Cress!" Chloe confirmed.

It was Blake's turn to be startled. "You-! So wait, you're the sister of..."

"Yep," Chloe confirmed.

"So, do... are you a pok  mon trainer, too?"

"Uh-huh. I train a raichu, an eelectross and a galvantula," said Chloe.

\_Electric types?! She's like-!\_ "Well, good! Good for you. And them. And, um." Blake was acutely aware he was blushing now; hopefully Chloe would think it was just the hot chocolate. "I, uh, can't help but notice... don't take this the wrong way, but, um, you're the spitting image of-" \_Elesa?\_ "-uh, Denise Crosby. In her younger days, I mean. And that electric gym leader, come to think of it. Oh, what was her name...?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Cheren's log, Wednesday the eighteenth of July: Blake has befriended a girl called Chloe, who turned out to be a talented pok  mon trainer. We have invited her to train with us, which may or may not relate to Blake's decision to do a hundred press-ups."<p>

"Seventy-four..." groaned Blake, "seventy-five... seventy-six... aaaaargh...! I'm knackered..."

As Blake's strength had grown, so too had his arms' respect for his legs, and his determination to find out what "knackered" really meant.

"\_YOU'RE knackered?!\_" cried George. "\_Well, I, sir, am tuckered out!\_" Watchogs were not built for press-ups.

"In addition," Cheren continued, "Bianca is currently tabulating our data on bouffalant gender dimorphism, and I will shortly correct it for her. I can hardly wait. Skorupi, regrettably, is going through a difficult time; complications with her evolution or something. Stacey has assured me that she can take care of her. This afternoon, we hope to collect Whitney from the mountain and challenge this city's gymnasium. Rashimo brought Whitney some clean socks this morning, while Zephyr just generally acted like her usual self-righteous self." Anything else? No, that about covered it. "End log."

Cheren screwed his eyes shut in concentration, filing away the log, then he turned his attention to Blake. "You really don't need to keep going, Blake. I've never known you to do more than fifty-

"AH, SHUDDUP!" Blake spat. He paused momentarily; was that seventy-nine or eighty? Best call it seventy-nine; he couldn't have Chloe thinking he was a slacker.

Cheren rolled his eyes. "This is about that girl, isn't it?"



"Girl? I don't \_(huff)\_ know what \_(huff)\_ you could possibly \_(huff)\_ be on about!" retorted Blake, breathing heavily.

"\_He means Chloe,\_" said Templeton.

"Chloe and Chloe! What is Chloe?!" demanded Blake.

"...Say what?" said Chloe.

"\_Her!\_ \_Y'know, the one who looks like Elesa, your precocious crush?\_" said Lilly.

Blake said nothing. To be fair to him, though, he'd just fainted.

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, on a snow-covered peak about an hour's walk andor climb from Icirrus City, Whitney was experiencing her darkest hour.

"Aaargh! I'm BORED!" wailed Whitney. Training atop a distant peak had seemed like a good idea, but there was only so much exercise you could do in a day. True, Durant's mandibles could now pierce the earth, Reuniclus was making some headway on splitting the seas and she herself could split the heavens a little, but it made no difference. Even after spending an hour or so painstakingly putting her socks on, she was bored out of her mind.

"Hey, Weezing, how does it feel having three heads?" Whitney asked absentmindedly. "I mean, eating could be a little complicated... You've got six eyes in total, so you'd have good depth perception, but wouldn't it be a little confusing? And how do you know which head you're using at a given time?"

Weezing blinked. "\_I... I haven't a clue.\_"

"Thought not." Whitney sighed. "I wonder if there's a book on weezing biology in that cave over there... Come on, let's check it out."

Whitney got to her feet, stretched, and, just to show off, triple-somersaulted over to the cave. Calling up a glowing blue aura of Aura to light her way, she wandered into the cave, sloshing through chill pools of water and occasionally slipping on an excessively smooth rock. Finding a biology textbook here was a bit of a long shot, she knew, but at least it would kill some time until Stacey and the gang came to pick her up.

"\_Lovely cave, very cavey,\_" said Durant approvingly, poking up from the floor of the cave.

"I suppose that's normal for mountain caves," said Whitney.

As the two companions wandered further into the cave, nothing interesting happened whatsoever. The cave looked nice, though, and Whitney appreciated the ambience, and the deep, rumbling snores emanating from deep within the mountain added a-

Wait. Snores?

"Durant... there's something else in this cave," said Whitney.

Durant squeaked.

"Maybe a beartic. Or a hydreigon, a snorlax, an abomasnow, a haxorus... a colony of aggrons, an ancient undiscovered pokÃ©mon waiting to beat the stuffing out of anyone who disturbs its slumber...! I'm not complaining, mind you." Whitney cupped her hands over her mouth. "Hey, unseen horrors of the cave! WAKE UP!"

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Got any sevens?<em>" asked Weezing.

"\_Go fish,\_" retorted Reuniclus, who had none.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Who dares to disturb my eternal slumber?<em>" the unseen horror of the cave rumbled, stalking with all the speed and power of a glacier towards Whitney and Durant. The light of Whitney's Aura shimmered on his sharp, rugged scales, and an ancient fire shone in his eyes.

"I, Whitney, daughter of Nerys, Hero of Ideals, wielder of the Trowel of Fire, heir to the throne of nowhere in particular and firstborn of the House of Blazeheart dare to disturb your eternal slumber!" retorted Whitney.

Durant made an introductory squeak.

"\_...All right.\_" The unseen horror took a few steps closer, revealing his spiky, armoured jaws and disproportionately small wings. "\_I am Druddogigar, the last of the ancient druddigon clans of the Far North. I am he who slew the first king of the gyarados, carved the twelfth face on Mount Rushmore, forged the Talon of Braviary-\_"

"What, the watchtower from Nuvema Town?!" cried Whitney.

"\_Aye. Two thousand years ago, I was a fully-qualified builder,\_" said Druddogigar proudly. "\_However, that doesn't really seem pertinent. Tell me, young Whitney and Durant, what brings you to my cave?\_"

"Curiosity, mostly," replied Whitney. "Anyway, what's it like being an ancient dragon?"

"\_Not quite the lark I used to think it would be, but there are benefits. For instance, no travelling merchants see fit to bother me, a significant number of young female druddigons wish to share my bed, nobody dares treat me with any degree of impunity, and...\_" Druddogigar came to a slow, rumbling halt. "\_Well, that's it, really. Will the two of you tell me a bit about yourselves?\_"

"Sure. As I said, I'm Whitney Blazeheart, an artist, poet, writer, pokÃ©mon trainer, strategist, explorer, complete hoyden and free spirit. I've got a girlfriend called Stacey, she's originally from Hoenn, and I do Aura and martial arts," said Whitney.

"\_I see. And what of you, Durant?\_"

Durant took a deep breath. "\_Well, let me see...\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>I spy,<em>" said Sigilyph, "\_with my little eye, something beginning with C.\_"

"\_Cliff?\_" guessed Weezing.

"\_Cave?\_" guessed Reuniclus.

"\_Claw-marks?\_" guessed Weezing.

Reuniclus blinked. "\_Why would there be claw marks?\_"

"\_I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation,\_" said Sigilyph confidently. "\_Anyway, do you give up?\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"Zzzzz..." snored Whitney.<p>

"\_...Which brings us quite nicely to the birth of my great-grandmother on my father's mother's side. Her name was Sarjita; a Hindi name, as I'm quite sure you know, which makes sense because she was Indian. In India, by the way, durants are known as cĀ«á¹†á¹-Ä«spÄ•ta\_\_s, from the Hindi words for steel and ant, and for a time my great-grandmother didn't even know what "durant" meant. She came to Japan as a young child, was reluctant to learn how to speak Japanese and blah-di-blah-di-blah-di-blah-di-blah-di-blah-di-blah...\_"

"\_For pity's sake, SHUT UP!\_" roared Druddogigar.

"Who?! What?! Where?!" cried Whitney, waking up with a start.

"\_Well, fine. I suppose \_some\_ people just can't appreciate good genealogy...\_" Durant huffed.

"Uh... quite," said Whitney. "So. Um."

"\_You're a pokÃ©mon trainer, correct?\_" asked Druddogigar.

Whitney nodded.

"\_I thought as much. Well, let me just say, before we get too involved in conversation or ignoring Durant, I do not intend to be captured,\_" said Druddogigar.

"Oh. Well, that's all right," said Whitney breezily.

Druddogigar blinked. "\_You... do \_not\_ desire to capture me?\_"

"I'd take Weezing, Durant, Reuniclus and Sigilyph over a weirdly-coloured mew, or even a garchomp."

Durant glowed with pride.

"\_And you'd take the four of them over an ancient druddigon, more powerful even than Kyurem?\_" said Druddogigar, raising a jagged eyebrow.

"Well... yeah," said Whitney, just a smidge confused. "You see, here's the thing: Durant and the others are my friends. We've been travelling together for years, or in Sigilyph's case weeks, and... well... we're a unit. It's nothing personal, but... well, don't worry about me trying to catch you."

Durant continued to glow with pride.

"\_Ah, right. I believe I understand,\_" said Druddogigar, a faint smile spreading across his craggy face. "\_You, daughter of Nerys, have honour. Integrity. A quality which, of late, I have been given to believe is lacking among humans.\_"

Whitney blinked. "Lacking? Why?"

Druddogigar took a deep breath. "\_A few years ago, I met an errant princess of an ancient hydreigon clan of the Outer Realms. She spoke to me of many things: liberation, separatism, human-supremacy... None of these had I known of before, and little did I then believe, until later that month I encountered a man named Ghetsis. He was a man of secrets, of darkness and shadow, and I assumed him to be a good representative of humanity. He attempted to recruit me for what he called "Team Neoplasm", a name I have come to associate with great pain and torment, and when I refused his offer, he was wroth. Much evil at his hands did I endure, yet still I prevailed, until at last I smote his ruin upon\_"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait just a moment or so," Whitney piped up. "I know Ghetsis. I know quite a lot about him, actually. Much inconvenience at his hands endure did I, but lo!, prevail we didst, and, um..." She took a deep breath, forcing herself to talk like she normally did, "Well, I definitely wouldn't call him a typical human. Look, I think this is the kind of thing we need to discuss over tea and toasted buns. Do you have any buns?"

"\_No.\_"

"Any tea?"

"\_Ah, no.\_"

"A kettle?"

"\_I have a teapot...\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"Are you sure we shouldn't wait a bit longer?" said Bianca, coming to a concerned halt in front of Brycen's gym. "Whitney's probably just tripped over a pot of honey or something, then stopped to eat the honey on some toast, or maybe she's drawing the honey." Bianca's brow furrowed. "Or... or what if she's fallen into a giant pool of honey, and now everything's sticking to her? What if someone made her eat all the honey and now she's got a tummy ache?!" Bianca

paused, taking a deep breath. "My point is, I want a honey sandwich."<p>

"Your head's full of honey," said Cheren heavily.

Bianca pouted.

"ANYWAY," said Blake loudly, "Whitney's sure to be along soon. She's tough enough to take care of herself, clockwork toasters notwithstanding-

"Don't tell her I told you about that," Stacey butted in.

"No worries. Anyway, our main focus now is gym battles. Chloe, you just follow our lead," said Blake, flashing her what he hoped was a charming, rogueish smile.

"I've got a Freeze Badge already," Chloe pointed out.

"...Oh. Well, either way, you're probably going to like the delicious meal I intend to prepare for all my friends... and new, already-much-beloved acquaintances!" declared Blake, rallying magnificently.

"Much-beloved, eh?" said Chloe. "Well, Blake, I can't deny there's something about you which makes me glad to hear "much-beloved". Since you're a guest in my hometown, though, I can't exactly leave all the cookery to you..."

"Well then, might we... collaborate?" said Blake passionately.

"On soup? With noodles?!" Chloe breathed, gazing into Blake's limpid sapphire orbs.

"\_And mushrooms!\_" Blake declared.

"Oh, Blake!" cried Chloe, smooching Blake.

"Oh, Chloe!" Blake agreed, smooching Chloe.

"Oh, brother," chorused Cheren, Stacey, Zephyr and Rashimo.

"Are they gonna start calling each other "honey"?" said Bianca curiously.

\* \* \*

><p>To cut a long story short, they challenged Brycen.<p>

"They say that I, Brycen, am among Unova's finest gym leaders, and possibly the greatest ice-type gym leader outside of Scandinavia," the man declared, in a calm and measured voice. "Certainly, I am unlikely to enslave Celebi in order to bring back a pair of laprases from the past, and I am also unlikely to sue a manga publisher for portraying me in an unflattering light, if only because I've been in my fair share of dreadful films already." He chuckled. "But enough about me. Which of you young warriors will be the first to face my dread legion of frost?"

"Well," said Cheren, "we're going in alphabetical order this time, so

I do believe it will be Bianca."

"That's my name, don't wear it out!" giggled Bianca.

"Excellent. Approach the battlefield, girl with beret!" shouted Brycen.

Bianca solemnly approached the battlefield (for a given value of "solemnly"), readying Templeton's pok  -ball. "I've approached, man without beret."

"Then let us begin. Vanillish, to the battlefront!"

The frigid blue pok  mon topped with white ice-cream materialised in front of Brycen.

\_Some ice-cream would be good about now. With honey...\_ Bianca cleared her throat. "Templeton, I summoneth thee!"

She tossed Templeton's pok  -ball onto the arena. The stocky orange pok  mon burst out onto the battlefield, looking rather ticked-off about being woken up on such short notice.

Brycen twitched. Did she really have to bring a fire-type?  
"Vanillish, light screen!"

Vanillish's eyes flashed blue. A wall of clear, crystalline light appeared in front of him.

"Flame charge!" ordered Bianca. Templeton rushed at Vanillish, fire swirling around his body as he slammed into him, ignoring the light screen. Vanillish was knocked out on the spot.

"Vanillish, return," sighed Brycen. "A fine performance, my young friend, in spite of certain unforeseen hazards." He replaced Vanillish's pok  -ball in his pocket, retrieving a second ball.  
"Vanilluxe, to the battlefront!"

A wave of frigid air blew over the battlefield as Vanilluxe materialised, her scowling faces in sharp contrast to Vanillish's cheery demeanour. "Luxe! Vanil!"

Brycen wasted no time. "Iron defence!"

Vanilluxe's twin ice-cream-icicle body glowed silvery-grey. No flame charge would get through her ironclad defences.

"Flamethrower, let's go!" ordered Bianca.

Vanilluxe whimpered.

With a roar (or possibly a yawn) of bestial fury, Templeton snorted out a raging stream of fire, thoroughly char-grilling Vanilluxe.

"I hate fire-types. Hate 'em. I do, I hate them," muttered Brycen, recalling Vanilluxe. "You fought well, well enough to prevail under better circumstances, but..." he gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Well, let's see if we can't spice things up a little. Walrein, to the battlefront!"

Bianca gave the massive, razor-tusked pok  mon a nervous look.  
"Templeton... you know hammer arm, right?"

Templeton nodded.

"Great! Then use hammer arm!"

"Not likely. Aqua jet, let's go!" ordered Brycen.

Walrein lunged forwards, slamming into Templeton like a very fast, very wet snow plough. Templeton staggered, then, regaining his composure, brought his arm down upon Walrein's head, knocking him out cold.

Grinding his teeth, muttering furiously, Brycen recalled Walrein. "Here's your badge," he declared, tossing Bianca a Freeze Badge.

"Wowee! It looks just like an icicle!" cried Bianca, pinning the badge to her shirt. "Thanks, Brycen."

She had considered bowing, but Brycen didn't seem to be in the mood for it, so instead she curtsied.

"\_Can I go back to bed now?\_" said Templeton groggily.

\* \* \*

><p>"Well, that was an interesting experience," commented Whitney. Frosty gravel crunched and skidded beneath her feet as she made her way down the mountain. It was more of a well-controlled plummet than a hike, really, and Durant was just plain sliding down, but at least this time there wasn't any rain.<p>

"\_Do you suppose we'll ever see Druddogigar again?\_" asked Weezing, muffled slightly by her pok  -ball.

"Oh, maybe... probably... almost certainly not... potentially," said Whitney vaguely. "I mean, we might visit him again, make sure he doesn't get lonely or go nuts up there."

Durant squeaked approvingly.

"This hydreigon princess, though... She intrigues me. Since when did hydreigons have a monarchy?" Whitney pondered. "I suppose it could just be those Totally Wicked Ancient Clans Of Ancientness Which Are Mysterious And Ancient he was talking about, as opposed to all hydreigons, but... well, I'm curious." She'd always had a soft spot for being curious, as well as for ancient clans.

\* \* \*

><p>"Darren, I choose you!" shouted Blake, throwing Darren's pok  -ball out onto the battlefield. The hot-blooded darmanitan leapt forth from his ball, eyebrows ablaze.<p>

"\_Blake, I am chosen by you, what-what!\_" roared Darren, thumping his chest.

Brycen groaned. "Bloody fire-types... Well, better take him down

quickly. Walrein, to the battlefield!"

With a flash of light, Walrein materialised, with markedly less enthusiasm than Darren.

"Flame charge, let's go!" ordered Blake. Darren flame charged.

"Hydro pump!" Brycen retorted. Walrein hydro pumped, missing Darren by a mile. Darren promptly fire-punched him.

"...Typical. I suppose you did your best," sighed Brycen, recalling Walrein. He took a moment to consider his options. "Claudia, to the battlefield!"

Light burst out over the battlefield. Wings of gleaming frost lashed through the air, stirring up frigid winds to chill Blake to the very core and ruffle Darren's eyebrows. The strength of an iceberg and the swiftness of a skier radiated out from her very soul, and her eyes gleamed with a promise of swift, cold, humiliating defeat. Claudia had awoken. She was the closest thing to the true Articuno of ancient times ever to have allied herself with a human, and she meant business.

"Flare blitz!" ordered Blake.

Darren used flare blitz.

Claudia fainted.

"I can't stand it!" sobbed Brycen. "Take the badges! Take them all! I quit!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Can't believe I forgot to put the fire out..." groaned Whitney, clambering back up the mountain.<p>

"\_I believe it,\_" muttered Durant.

\* \* \*

><p>Brycen, thankfully, had not quit; a cup of tea calmed him down, courtesy of Blake, and Cheren and Stacey both swore blind they had no fire-types.<p>

"A battle is a battle," sighed Brycen, "but I honestly wish ice-type pokÃ©mon didn't have it quite so hard. Anyway, whomever is next, approach the battlefield."

Cheren approached, readying Sawk's pokÃ©-ball.

"Vanilluxe, to the battlefield!"

Vanilluxe materialised, looking slightly apprehensive.

"Sawk, come forth!"

Sawk materialised, hastily straightening out her belt.



\_A fighting-type. Of course. It had to be,\_ Brycen moaned inwardly. It was hard, being a gym leader.

"Mega punch, if you please," ordered Cheren.

Sawk lunged at Vanilluxe, driving her fist into the ice cream pokémon's abdomen. Vanilluxe cringed.

"Um..." said Brycen.

"Bulk up," Cheren commanded.

Energy surged through Sawk's muscles as she struck a couple of stupendously butch poses, visibly delighted with how the battle was progressing.

"Frost breath!" ordered Brycen hastily.

Ice crystallised around Vanilluxe's mouths as she exhaled with all her might. Even if she was probably going to get creamed again, she had some proper direction now.

Sawk somersaulted neatly over the frost breath, sticking her tongue out at Vanilluxe in the process.

"Brick break!" commanded Cheren.

Sawk used brick break. Vanilluxe fainted.

"Vanilluxe, return," said Brycen murderously. "Claudia, to the battlefront!"

Wings of gleaming frost, frigid winds, promise of swift, cold, humiliating defeat, closest thing to the true Articuno, you know the drill. Claudia's last defeat still hung heavy on her brow, but she was far from cowed.

Cheren could not help but smirk. "Fire punch, let's go!"

Sawk used fire punch. Claudia fainted.

Brycen broke down in tears.

\* \* \*

><p>When Whitney finally came trudging over to the gym, she was in a terrible state. Sweat poured from her body, flowed down pretty much everywhere and pooled inside her boots, which were already overflowing, and she was wet, dusty and battered all over.<p>

"Oh, my days, Whitney, what happened?!" wailed Stacey, pulling Whitney into a warm, tender embrace. (Well, I say "embrace"; Whitney more sort of flopped into her arms.)

"Complications," panted Whitney. "I had to go back up the mountain, then I sort of tumbled down it. Didn't hurt too much, but I had to go back up again to give Druddogigar back his teapot. Then I fell in one of those really cold mountain lakes, slid down the mountain on my spare waterskis, fell into a heatmor's den, fought it bare-handed, comforted Durant... Gee, I'm hot and I'm wet... and hungry..."

So saying, Whitney passed out.

"Oh, Whitney..." sighed Stacey, tender, loving tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

"There's only one thing for it. I'll have to make her some citrus berry broth," said Blake gravely.

"And a nice, fortifying omelette, with cheese and black pudding," agreed Chloe.

"Good thinking, all," said Cheren.

For a few moments, no-one said anything. There was nothing to say.

Bianca, however, did not care. "I suppose this means she won't want to battle Brycen today."

"Thank Arceus!" declared Brycen.

"A pity," said Rashimo. "I daresay young Whitney would've fancied a nice, honourable battle, don't'cherknow? No cheap tactics, no overblown type advantages... Just strategy, teamwork and, y'know, friendship and whatnot."

"How very idealistic," said Zephyr.

"Hey, Whitney, WAKE UP!" screamed Brycen.

### 30. Chapter 30: Iris is Back

**\*\*~Chapter Thirty: Whitney's Gym Battle, the Return of Iris, Pineapple Stew and a Cliffhanger~\*\***

A warm wind blew over the mountains north of Icirrus City, making wisps of snow dance in the air. Her six wings beating hard and fast, Heidi carefully lowered herself to the ground. She peered at the cave opposite her landing site and glanced down at the map in her hand-mouths; this was definitely the place.

"\_Druddogigar? Are you in there?\_" Heidi called, knocking on a suitably percussive stalactite.

"\_Who is it?\_" came the rather sleepy reply.

"\_Heidi,\_" replied Heidi.

Druddogigar sighed, with a sound like a small avalanche. "\_You're the third person to disturb my eternal slumber this week, my errant friend. Honestly, I'm never gonna get any rest like this...\_"

Heidi knew him well enough to know this meant she could come in, so she did, squeezing in through the mouth of the cave. "\_I came to check up on you, see how you're getting on. Who were the first two people this week?\_"

"\_A human, Whitney, and a durant, Durant. Apparently, Whitney was the

Hero of Ideals.\_"

Heidi blinked. "\_Whitney? Quite tall, ginger hair, looks like a farm girl? Warm, earthy smell, with just a hint of stale sweat?\_"

"\_That's the one. I take it you know her.\_"

"\_Oh, yes. She was a thorn in my side for some time, right up until that incident in Driftveil City, whereupon she became one of our staunchest allies. I think. It's kind of complicated.\_"

"\_I daresay. How's the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation getting on, by the way?\_"

"\_Pretty well. Ever since we stopped kidnapping pokÃ©mon and attacking cities, our popularity's skyrocketed, but there's still quite a bit of resistance to pokÃ©mon equality in some places. And there are those who still think Ghetsis's influence is still... well, influencing us, and-\_"

"\_Hold up. Ghetsis? The Dark Lord? Him, with the green hair and the staff and the stupid diadem?!\_" cried Druddogigar. "\_He's been stirring up quite a bit of trouble lately, so I've heard. Shadow pokÃ©mon are coming down from the north, from beyond Anville Town and Victory Road, and we all know they're Ghetsis's modus operandi.\_"

"\_Uh, for how long?\_"

"\_For sixty years, at least.\_"

Heidi's cheeks coloured. Sixty years. She'd only noticed, what, a month ago? Two?

"\_Now that you're here, Heidi, I think we should survey the mountains a little, see if there's trouble brewing. We ancient dragons must stick together, you know?\_"

"\_Uh, yes, right. I'd like that,\_" said Heidi.

\* \* \*

><p>The atmosphere was charged in Icirrus City Gym, and the audience stands were packed. (There were about thirty smallish, comfy seats in all, and all the pokÃ©mon wanted to watch the battle. You do the maths.) Durant met his opponent's icy stare with a steely gaze, tensing his body to spring. Whitney met Brycen's look of fierce determination with her own blend of rosy-cheeked, fresh-as-a-daisy optimism, just because she could. She'd save the grimmacing and biting her lip for a tight spot.<p>

"Miss Blazeheart, I trust you have no fire-type pokÃ©mon?" Brycen asked sniffily.

"None whatsoever," confirmed Whitney.

"No fighting-types or rock-types?"

"None."

"Plenty of flying- and grass-types?"

"Uh, one sigilyph, but no grass-types."

"Well, see that your sigilyph participates in the battle. Any funny business from you will not be tolerated. Is that clear?"

"Clear as mud!" said Whitney breezily.

"...Vanillish, let us turn this girl's smug smile upside-down. Icicle spear, let's go!" ordered Brycen.

Razor-sharp icicles formed in the air around Vanillish, and with a cry of "Lish vanil! Vanilli!" he loosed them at Durant. Durant shot forwards. The icicle spears sailed harmlessly over his head, only grazing one of his antennae.

"Eep!" Whitney squeaked, diving out of the icicle spears' path. "Nice dodge there, Durant. Very dodgy. Now give him a taste of iron head!"

"Not likely. Uproar, let's go!" ordered Brycen.

Vanillish took a deep breath.

"Belay that iron head! Dig!" commanded Whitney, with some degree of urgency.

Durant dove into the earth just Vanillish started caterwauling, sending deadly sound waves reverberating out over the battlefield.

"Ha! It would seem I have found a move not even your Durant can cope with, Blazeheart," said Brycen smugly.

"What?! I can't hear you!" shouted Whitney.

"I said IT WOULD SEEM I HAVE FOUND A MOVE NOT EVEN YOUR DURANT CAN COPE WITH!" Brycen roared, barely audible over Vanillish's uproar.

"HE'S USING DIG, YOU DIMWIT!" retorted Whitney, cupping her hands over her mouth.

"OH, I'VE PUT SOME THOUGHT INTO ANTI-DIG STRATEGIES, MARK MY WORDS!" snapped Brycen. "I AM A GYM LEADER, AFTER ALL! VANILLISH, TAKE TO THE AIR AND USE HARDEN!"

Bringing his uproar to a jarring stop, Vanillish floated up over the battlefield. A lattice of icy armour grew over his skin, looking suspiciously like a waffle cone.

"Impressive. Normally, a pokémon cannot cease using uproar until the move runs its course," Cheren commented.

"I guess," said Blake.

Whitney couldn't help but smile as Durant shot out of the floor and smashed into Vanillish, sending him flying. Vanillish rebounded

roughly off the ceiling and plummeted, just barely levitating himself hard enough to avoid an encounter with the floor.

"Iron head!" ordered Whitney, with a triumphant edge to her voice.

Vanillish sagged visibly.

Durant headbutted Vanillish with all the steely power of a small cannon ball, shattering his armour and knocking him out cold.

"Get it? Out \_cold\_?!" giggled Bianca.

Zephyr gave her a funny look.

"You fought well, Vanillish. Return," said Brycen warmly, recalling Vanillish.

"\_It was more fun this time, that's for sure,\_" said Vanillish shakily.

Brycen retrieved a second pok  mon-ball. "This battle is only just beginning, Whitney, and I do not intend to suffer a humiliating defeat five times in a row. Vanilluxe, to the battlefield!"

Brycen hurled the ball in Whitney's direction, once more unleashing Vanilluxe.

Whitney couldn't count on the same strategies applying here as for Vanillish. "Durant, return." Seeing Durant's look of confusion, she added, "It's probably best if you conserve your strength for his third pok  mon. Besides, I've got a plan." She winked; a wink which all her more sensible enemies would take for a dire warning, and Durant trusted completely.

Whitney tossed a pok  mon-ball into the air. "Weezing, I choose you!"

"Weezing, huh? She might not be at her best here," said Stacey worriedly. "A weezing's greatest strength is its physical defence, and-"

"\_Will you please shut up?! We're trying to watch!\_" snapped Beedrill.

"Lots of multi-bodied pok  mon here, I see," said Brycen, as Weezing coughed defiance at him and Vanilluxe. "Aren't weezings only meant to have two heads, though?"

"Weezing's not exactly mainstream," said Whitney proudly. "Anyway, without further ado, sludge bomb!"

Weezing spat out a ball of slimy, brownish-purplish-greenish-grey sludge.

"Mirror shot!" ordered Brycen.

Vanilluxe's eyes flashed silvery-grey. With all the strength she could muster, she summoned up a shimmering ball of light and hurled it at the incoming sludge bomb. The two attacks collided in midair.

Weezing, Vanilluxe, Brycen and Whitney were showered with goo and shiny, glowy stuff.

"Well, if that's how you want to play it, freeze-dry!" commanded Brycen.

Vanilluxe smiled. This was the kind of attack she was used to. Mist poured off Vanilluxe as she chilled the air around her, loosing a frigid blast towards Weezing.

"Flamethrower, if you please," said Whitney smugly.

Weezing's central head deflated with a loud, rather uncivil noise, inflating her two outer heads. This was a dangerous technique only the strongest of weezings could pull off, since it involved not only mixing various dangerous gases but igniting them at the right moment. Acutely aware that the freeze-dry attack was rapidly gaining ground on her, Weezing squared her proverbial shoulders, took a deep breath and expectorated a roaring column of flame.

Vanilluxe gave a cry of pain as the fire washed over her. Her attack had taken the worst out of it, but it was still powerful, and she could feel her energy ebbing away.

"Vanilluxe, stay strong!"

The concern in Brycen's voice cut through Vanilluxe's deep, dark, angsty despair. She was strong, that's true- Walrein could posture all he liked, but only Claudia could truly call herself her superior. And a weezing was still a weezing, nowhere near as powerful as a vailluxe.

"Luxe vanil! Vanil!" shouted Vanilluxe, glaring defiantly up at Weezing (who was hovering quite high up).

"That's the spirit. Sheer cold, let's go!" ordered Brycen.

Vanilluxe grinned. Not even Claudia knew that one.

Whitney bit her lip. Sheer cold was the most powerful of all ice-type attacks, guaranteed to knock an opponent out if it made contact. That was a big "if", though. "Weezing, smokescreen!"

Seeing the wisdom in her words, Weezing hastily belched out a cloud of thick, grey smoke, hanging heavy in the air. It was not a moment too soon; a ray of purest coldness blasted into the fog, freezing the very air as it passed.

For a moment, all was quiet, save for Vanilluxe panting heavily. The smoke slowly drifted aside, revealing Weezing, frozen solid.

"YES! Oh, yes! We did it! We did it! We did it! FINALLY!" Brycen rejoiced.

"Are you okay?" said Whitney worriedly, cradling Weezing in her arms. Weezing made no reply.

Whitney recalled Weezing, planting a tender kiss on her forehead. A short kiss, so as to avoid having her lips frozen off.

The fire in Brycen's heart had been rekindled (just a metaphor; please do shut up), and he seemed unlikely to calm down any time soon. "Now, Whitney, you have witnessed the power of my \_fully armed and operational\_ vanilluxe! Do you dare to continue battling me?!"

"Oh, we dare, all right. We will fight you on the beaches. We will fight you in the air! We will never surrender! NEVER!" Whitney took another poké-ball from her pocket. "Sigilyph, I choose you!"

Sigilyph materialised.

"HA! You have the unmitigated gall to assail me with a flying-type?!" roared Brycen, who had by now worked himself up into a real state. "You impudent fool! We will freeze the very core of his being!"

"\_Her\_ being," Whitney corrected him.

"IRRELEVANT! By Jove, lambast her at once with your finest blizzard!" ordered Brycen.

Vanilluxe called up a whirling, roaring vortex of snow, aiming it at Sigilyph.

"Don't let him get to you, Sigilyph. Extremspeed, let's go!"

Sigilyph charged headlong into Vanilluxe, sending her flying. The blizzard, left hanging in the air without a controller, drifted off into nothingness.

"WHAT?! You have the nerve to strike my beloved vanilluxe?! I the name of Arceus-"

"Oh, shut up. Finish her off with psybeam!" ordered Whitney.

A ray of psychic energy lanced out from Sigilyph's eye, catching Vanilluxe right in the pointy cone bit. Finally overcome, Vanilluxe fainted.

"...What?" Brycen clenched his fists. "What is this?! You dare to defeat Vanilluxe?! You impudent brat! I will annihilate you!"

"That was wicked, Sigilyph!" declared Whitney, ignoring the irate gym leader.

Still grinding his teeth, Brycen recalled Vanilluxe, muttering a few words of sympathy as her poké-ball drew her back inside. He replaced the ball on his belt, then, after a moment's careful consideration, reached for Claudia's ball. "Claudia, to the battlefield! Bring glory once more to Icirrus City!"

Claudia materialised in her usual spectacular fashion, screeching a battle-cry fierce enough to chill the hearts of most people smaller than she.

Whitney knew Claudia could be beaten, and she was confident; Durant looked well-rested, and Sigilyph wouldn't be too tired. "Hey,

Sigilyph, ever fought a legendary pokÃ©mon?"

"\_Alas, no,\_" replied Sigilyph. "\_Once, however, as a guardian of the ancient citizens of the Desert Resort, I was called upon to deal with a minor infestation of giant scraggies and scrafties, rendered overly large by an ancient cubchoo growth formula. A great hunger filled... uh, rather, left empty their bellies, although it did sort of fill their hearts, and in a matter of hours, they consumed all the food to be found in the entire resort. I and my fellow guardians fought long and hard against them, with all the power and might at our disposal, and many a scraggy fled with its tail betwixt its legs, but the scrafties were too great for us. Therefore, we decided to-\_"

"That's really fascinating, but, uh, kind of not important right now," said Whitney, trying to let her down gently.

"Nice of you to notice," said Brycen coldly.

Sigilyph blushed.

"Anyway, Claudia's part flying-type like you are, so this move should work. Synchronoise, let's go!"

Waves of psychic energy pulsated out from Sigilyph, battering Claudia. The articuno screeched in pain, then, unbidden, sent rays of ice like frozen lightning out over the battlefield. The rays fanned out around Sigilyph. There was nowhere for her to run; she was trapped.

"Ha! Your sigilyph has fallen victim to Claudia's own special move, a move so powerful, so devious, none can escape it!" said Brycen proudly, as Sigilyph came down with an acute case of hypothermia. "Frigid web, she calls it. A moderately powerful attack which never misses and can hit multiple targets all at once. True, learning it took time she could otherwise have devoted to learning sheer cold, but I think the payoff's good enough."

Ignoring him, Whitney recalled Sigilyph. There was no tender kiss this time- Sigilyph didn't really have any convenient places to smooch- but she could tell Whitney was proud of her.

"I'm proud of you," Whitney informed Sigilyph, which probably helped.

Durant looked up at Whitney. "\_Me next, right?\_"

"Yep," Whitney confirmed.

"It's always him last, isn't it?" commented Blake. "I mean, come rain or shine, Durant just has to be the one to finish off the strongest opponent."

"Shut up," Rashimo advised him.

"Blizzard!" ordered Brycen.

Beating her wings furiously, Claudia called up a roaring vortex of wind and snow, which she hurled towards Durant.

"Use agility! Attack pattern delta!" commanded Whitney.



Durant was off like a shot, just barely evading the blizzard as he careened behind Claudia, building up his speed.

"Keep it up, Durant! Speed is what an articuno doesn't have as much of as you'd think, and we need lots!" declared Whitney. Durant made no indication that he'd heard- how could he, after all?- but he continued running around in circles, blurring out into a ring of silver.

Brycen was not overly impressed. "Is this supposed to be some kind of double team? It won't work. Claudia, frigid web!"

Claudia's eyes glowed clear blue. Rays of ice snaked out from her in all directions, a forest of frigid claws reaching for Durant.

"Sandstorm!" ordered Whitney.

Claudia gulped.

A whirling, biting wave of sand leapt up from under Durant's feet, a stinging vortex as fast as he was circling; fast enough to rip Claudia's frigid web to pieces. Durant smashed clean through the larger bits of ice.

"Sand, mightier than ice?! Inconcievable! Hail, let's go!" commanded Brycen.

Shutting her eyes against the sandstorm, Claudia called down a barrage of hailstones, pummeling the sandstorm. The two weather systems battered against one-another, vying for control, but they were evenly matched.

"HA! A mere sandstorm can never hope to resist the power of ice!" laughed Brycen. "You fool! Your durant will fall in seconds, his broken body scattered upon the wind. Speaking of which, use aerial ace!"

Aerial ace never missed, Whitney knew, but that would be no big deal. "Iron head!"

Claudia had barely taken aim when Durant came barelling into her, knocking her clean across the battlefield.

"Don't let up! Use metal claw!" Whitney insisted.

Durant's claws sang through the air as he slashed Claudia's soft, downy belly. At long last, exhausted from her exploits, Claudia slowly toppled over. Her eyes slid shut, then went all swirly.

"Yahoo! You did it!" squealed Whitney, drawing Durant into a warm, tender embrace.

"\_Nothing to it,\_" said Durant, breathing heavily.

The Magnificent Many poured (well, trickled; there weren't \_that\_ many of them) down to the battlefield to congratulate Whitney, who blushed profusely and by-and-large confirmed any reports of how

awesome she was. Many pats on the back were administered, plus a pat on the front from Stacey.

"It all happened so fast. I couldn't reach her back, but I had to pat her somewhere," Stacey explained, when later interviewed about the event.

"I suppose," said Brycen heavily, "you'll want a badge now." He reached grudgingly into his pocket, retrieved a Freeze Badge, and, scowling ferociously, handed it to Whitney.

"Thanks, Brycen!" said Whitney, all smiles, pinning the badge to her top.

Brycen grunted something.

"Brycen, buck up, will you?" said Chloe reproachfully. "Whitney battled you fair and square, according to all your conditions, and she won. She just plain won, thanks to the strength and agility of Durant, the power and resilience of Weezing, and the other stuff of Sigilyph."

"\_Nice to be noticed,\_" muttered Sigilyph.

\* \* \*

><p>"Alas," said Blake gravely, "I fear now that, since we no longer have purpose to remain here in fair Icirrus City, a moment must come which I have for the past week or so been fearing. Parting is such a sweet sorrow, 'tis said, yet I must confess I feel naught but sorrow. O fair Chloe, golden-haired maiden of thunder and haute cuisine, though it rendeth my heart asunder to bid thee farewell-"<p>

"See ya!" called Chloe, waving over her shoulder as she climbed back up the stairs to Icirrus City.

"...Uh," said Blake.

"Nice meeting you! 'Bye!" shouted Bianca.

"Give our regards to your brothers!" agreed Cheren.

"Best wishes!" yelled Whitney. Someone had to say it.

"Get your people to call my people, we'll do lunch sometime," said Zephyr, completely deadpan.

"Shut up, Zephie," said Rashimo.

"Shut up, Rashie, don't 'cherknow, what-what?!" Zephyr retorted.

"Will you two please get a grip?" said Stacey heavily.

"I LOVE YOU, CHLOE!" declared Blake. What Chloe shouted in reply was lost on the wind, but everyone could see her blowing Blake a kiss.

"Now, then," said Cheren, diverting his attention back to his friends, "we must away to the Moor of Icirrus at once. It is a day's

walk from here, over much of Route 8, and there are many unusual pokémon to be found on the moor. It is said to be the home of Virizion, Cobalion and Terrakion, too, so keep your eyes peeled- yes, Bianca?"

"Don't we need more supplies first?" Bianca pointed out. "I mean, we don't have much food left, and Floella's got earache..."

\* \* \*

><p>I shan't go into too much detail over how the Magnificent Many stocked up on cotton buds and potatoes, nor the singing competition they ended up entering the following day. Stacey reached the semi-finals, but lost to a boy from Accumula Town, and that was that.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Route 8 was a marshland, crisscrossed by rivers, pebbledashed with bogs and garnished with swamps. Tall grasses poked up from deep, sparkling water. A cold mist hung low over the ground, and long-abandoned pairs of shoes sat forlornly in the occasional pool of quicksand. It was the kind of place where no-one could have any fun whatsoever.<p>

"This is so much fun!" Whitney squealed, marching merrily through the mire. "I just love mud. It's so squidgy and gooey and... je ne sais quoi."

"\_I concur!\_" Serperior smiled, slithering sloppily through the sludge.

"It's funny you should mention je ne sais quoi, but marshlands like this play a vital role in the ecosystem," Stacey commented. "Which actually has nothing to do with je ne sais quoi, but I felt it needed to be said."

"Not to mention the excuse for alliteration. Oh, and they've got loads of good stuff for a terrarium," said Bianca cheerily. "I wonder if I should start a terrarium. I've got an old goldfish bowl somewhere..."

Cheren sighed and rolled his eyes. "Girls, eh? They have no concerns but mud, bugs, fast cars and stuff."

"And what of me?" asked Zephyr, raising her eyebrows.

"You're a tomboy," said Cheren, without missing a beat.

"And... what does that make Blake?" asked Zephyr, gesturing to Blake, who had become embroiled in a mud fight with Whitney.

"A metaphor too far. I mean, I was only joking..." said Cheren petulantly.

\* \* \*

><p>A warm sun rose over the Moor of Icirrus. Tall, lush grass rustled softly in the breeze, and the marshier bits were filled by tympoles, palpitoads and seismoitoads (who tended to be early risers).

Whitney's and Blake's clothes hung from a nearby tree, mostly dry by now.<p>

"Cheren's log, Monday the twenty-third of July, the Year of Our Lord 4296 AD: I am the only halfway competent member of this so-called Magnificent so-called Many." Stacey's impression of Cheren was superb, almost uncanny with his glasses perched elegantly on her nose. "Bianca is a fool, her days consumed by incompetent thoughts and incessant eating of various comestibles. Stacey is the far opposite; so obsessed with her own intellect that she has nary a thought for the group."

Stacey, Bianca, Whitney, Blake, Zephyr, Rashimo and Durant were clustered around Cheren's sleeping bag, trying in vain not to laugh. Poor Cheren was out like a log; there had been a Star Trek marathon on channel twelve last night, but they were camping out in the middle of nowhere, so he, Whitney and Stacey had acted out their five favourite episodes (although Whitney and Stacey fell asleep after a few hours).

"Furthermore," Stacey went on, "Whitney, although gifted with the physique of Athena, the heart of Hercules and the mental prowess of Pythagoras, is too freckly to be of use to our group, not to mention her rather lax attitude to personal hygiene. And what of Blake? Well, he is quite simply Blake. Good old Blake Stormheart. Good old Blake Stormheart... Yes, sir... How I hate him."

Everybody laughed like drains.

"Oh, Whitney, your eyes are 86.16308529% akin to limpid pools of starlight! Your nose is perfectly in accordance with the Golden Ratio! Your lips are 34.10986434% cuter than the national average! I love you with 100% of my heart!" declared Blake, speaking fast and squeakily; a decent enough Stacey impression. "Also, behaviourism is the psychological discipline based around the idea that every living thing has certain conditioned behaviours, brought about due to positive and negative reinforcement, and marshes play a vital role in the ecosystem. According to my calculations, potatoes are best eaten mashed with a little salt and butter."

More drain-like laughter followed.

"I say, Zephie, old fruit, old bean, old shoe, stop bein' so self-righteous and obsessed with the truth, what-what?!" declared Zephyr, doing her best impression of Rashimo.

Rashimo sniffed. "My dear, stupid brother, your overly idealistic attitude is like a dagger to my heart. Please cease and desist, else I shall be forced to electrocute you to within an inch of your life. Also, I hate everything."

"The name's Stormheart, Blake Stormheart, and I am very different from Ash," said Whitney, doing her best Blake voice: deep-ish, with a faint Cockney twang. "Sure, I've got black hair, sort of tanned skin, I wear jeans and a jacket even though it's the height of summer, I'm a paragon of virtue, I'm pretty athletic, I owe a red-haired girl a new bicycle, I used to have a hat and my first pokÃ©mon didn't really like me to begin with, but that's meaningless. I am the least ashy person who is are will ever will going to have going to existing!"

The Many fell about themselves laughing, although Blake was a little disturbed she still remembered the bicycle.

"Morning, people," said Cheren groggily, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Ah, I see you're up already. I'll just go and brush my teeth, then we can... uh, what's going on?"

"We were just, uh, cl-cleaning your... your glasses!" guffawed Stacey, completely failing to contain it.

"Okay..." said Cheren, retrieving his spectacles, which he placed reverentially upon his face. "You haven't done a very good job of it."

\* \* \*

><p>A couple of shelmets lounged in a marshy pool, still enough for Whitney to make a beautiful pencil drawing of them both. However, one of them kept fretting about whether Whitney was catching her best side, and by the end of it she had gone through four pencils, twelve sheets of paper and much of her patience, and took out her pent-up anger on Blake.<p>

"\_I suppose this counts as training...\_" said Samantha dubiously, as Blake ducked under a blast of Aura fire.

"\_I guess. Speaking of which, think fast!\_" shouted Lilly, pouncing on her samurott chum.

\* \* \*

><p>Cheren and Bianca spent the day writing up pokÃ©dex entries. Well, Bianca did; Cheren mostly proof-read Bianca's articles.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Stacey spent a quiet afternoon teaching Zephyr how to play football. She had the hooves for it, but it took her a while to stop kicking the ball clean over the horizon. And once she'd got the hang of that, there was the small matter of not using flame charge all the time.<p>

"I don't care if it's your "natural ability", you're 217.284795% faster than the average footballer already! Stop taking the mickey!"

"Well, pardon me for using every skill at my disposal..."

\* \* \*

><p>In the evening, Blake prepared some squid and pineapple broth; a strange, yet appealing taste, and quite filling to boot. For the herbivores among the Magnificent Many, there was pineapple broth.<p>

"\_Serperior, you can have my pineapple chunks,\_" muttered Samantha, spooning a few chunks of pineapple into her friend's bowl. "\_I have a moral objection to eating pineapple. It's... well... hideous.\_"

"\_I don't mind them,\_" Serperior pointed out, gladly accepting the extra pineapple. "\_I can't stand kumquats, though.\_"

"\_Well, my biggest culinary bugbear has to be semolina,\_" said Unfezant. "\_I had some once, and my beak was never the same.\_"

"Well, for me, it's Swiss cheese!"

Nobody knew where she had come from, but there, standing proudly in the branches of a nearby tree, stood a girl wearing a cream-coloured t-shirt, pink trousers, a brown safari jacket and thigh-boots. Her hair was shaped into two prodigious bunches, each one as big as her head, and a pair of goggles perched delicately on her forehead.

"Iris?! What are you doing here?" cried Whitney.

"Just chilling, y'know? Standing in a tree, proclaiming my hatred of Swiss cheese... Seriously, I'm not putting anything with that many holes in my mouth. Bagels I can stand, donuts are delicious, I even partake in the occasional pretzel, but Swiss cheese?!" She shuddered. "I just can't cope with its holier-than-thou attitude."

Whitney giggled.

"Do we know her?" muttered Rashimo.

"Well, since we've crossed paths once more, why don't you pull up a chair?" offered Cheren.

"Yeah. It'll be great hearing you say "bodacious" lots of times!" said Bianca warmly. "Such a great word..."

Iris leapt down from the tree. Her jacket billowed out behind her as she landed flat on her face, yet remained cheerful as she rose to her feet and joined her many magnificent friends.

"You probably haven't met my brother," said Zephyr, taking the initiative. She gestured to Rashimo. "This is Rashimo, the Avatar of Reshiram, embodiment of ideals and complete and utter nincompoop. Rashimo, this is Iris, the co-leader of Opelucid City Gym."

"THE Reshiram?! Oh, my days, this is the most awesomest moment of my life!" squealed Iris. Her eyes shone with the light of a very excited person's eyes. "Can you show me your dragon form? Oh, please show me!"

"Ah, now, for that I'd need the Light Stone," said Rashimo apologetically. "We'll probably end up on a quest to find the blasted thing sooner or later, though."

"Oh," said Iris, deflating slightly.

"Nevertheless, I'm charmed," the mighty rapidash added, shaking Iris warmly by the hand (with his hoof). "I've heard of yer gym. Finest gymnasium this side of Mount Coronet, what?"

"Wha...?! Th-thank you!" A warm blush coloured Iris's cheeks. She'd only known Rashimo for five minutes, and already he'd complimented

her. It was a dream come true.

Zephyr gave Iris a heavy look. She didn't remember being fawned over like this back in Castelia City.

"How are you, then? How's Drayden?" asked Blake.

"Well, Grandpa stubbed his toe on a vacuum cleaner, but he made a full recovery," said Iris. "As for me, you're looking at the founder, the leader and, uh, only member of the Opelucid City Survey Scouts!"

"Opelucid City Survey Scouts?" repeated Rashimo.

"A brand-new youth group. I founded it a couple of weeks ago," explained Iris. "Our... well, my aim is to help children in Opelucid City develop confidence and practical skills."

"Sounds good," said Stacey.

"You see, Opelucid City is the city of fearsome dragons, mighty warriors and miscellaneous awesomeness and bodacity, and quite a few children feel sort of... well... outclassed. They think they'll never be as cool as me or Grandpa- which is true, by the way, but not too big a deal- so they just stop trying," explained Iris. "They'd rather stay in bed under a blanket, and never go outside and get dirty or take any risks, so they stagnate."

"That's terrible!" cried Blake.

"Why, yes, Blake, it is! I wasn't expecting anyone to get that so soon," said Iris, clearly impressed. "Anyway, I'm the leader and sole member of the Survey Scouts now. Oh, and my fifteenth birthday's next week, so, yeah... What's new with you guys?"

"Well, we all have a Freeze Badge now," declared Whitney. "And Blake seems to have a girlfriend."

"That's true. Her name's Chloe Vostenlorensomething," said Blake. He couldn't help but grin at the thought of her complicated name. "She's so warm and friendly... so huggable... so electrifying... so great at cooking... and eating..."

"Well, good for her," said Iris warmly. "And also good for you. Anything else?"

"My cape completely disintegrated a short while ago. Fortunately, I still have my scarf," Cheren piped up. "It's losing its colour, though..."

"You're right. I hadn't noticed," said Blake worriedly, closely inspecting Cheren's scarf. "It used to be bright red, but I'd call that sort of... burgundy?"

"Crimson," offered Flygon.

"Auburn," suggested Unfezant.

"Maroon," said Durant.

"\_It looks sort of Tuscan red from here,\_" Carlos commented.

Skorupi gave Flygon a sideways look. "\_There's no way that's crimson.\_"

"In my professional opinion," said Cheren firmly, "it is dark red. I think it looks quite fetching, actually, with my hair..."

\* \* \*

><p>The group enjoyed a quiet evening together, broken only by Iris going on about foodstuffs with holes.<p>

"I like spaghetti and pasta bows, but never the little wagon wheels. They're just icky," she explained.

"Well, I like bananas," said Bianca sagely.

After that, there was nothing more to say.

As the last few rays of sunlight slid softly down past the horizon, the sky flamed with a symphony of orange and pink, and a couple of accelgors tried in vain to coax their son into bed. It had been a fine day-

"RING! RING! RING!"

"Uh, that's my cross-transciever. Hold on a minute," said Iris sheepishly, retrieving the mobile videophone thingy from her pocket. She had never been one for creative ringtones, but they tended to be ear-splitting all the same. "Hello? ... Uh, somewhere in the Moor of Icirrus, I think. ... I've met up with a few friends here, and... Well, no, no-one else went with me. ... Look, don't worry, the Survey Scouts are sure to get going sooner or later. ... Yeah. Uh, yeah, why? WHAT?!" All eyes were now on Iris. "You're kidding me. The queen? ... What, all of them?! Of course I'll be there. Right away. Okay, love you, 'bye!"

Iris slotted her cross-transciever carefully into her pocket, taking a steadying breath. "That was Grandpa. Apparently, Opelucid City's being besieged by an army of dragons, and there's some weird mutant haxorus leading the charge."

Blake shot Whitney a nervous glance. Whitney shot Cheren a nervous glance. Cheren shot Stacey a nervous glance. Stacey shot Bianca a nervous glance. Bianca shot Blake a nervous glance. Zephyr and Rashimo shared a nervous glance of their own.

"Okay, so..." Iris cleared her throat. "Anyone feel up to helping us out?"

"Of course we will!" said Bianca fiercely. "Although I'm kind of hoping the battle gets cancelled because of rain."

"Bianca's right," declared Cheren, a fierce look in his eyes. "We have no family or stuff in Opelucid City, it is true, but it matters not. We, as halfway decent pokÃ©mon trainers, have a moral duty to stand up for truth, justice and the Unovan way! In the name of Arceus-"



"We're in, too," said Stacey quickly. It was getting late, Opelucid City was a day's brisk hike away, and Cheren had been known to go on for hours.

"You have my sword!" shouted Whitney, pulling a small pocket knife from, well, her pocket.

"And my rolling pin!" agreed Blake.

"\_And my mandibles!\_" declared Durant.

Iris's eyes were shining. The wonders that were Friendship and Teamwork never ceased to amaze her. "You guys...! Okay, as of now, I am making you all honorary members of the Opelucid City Survey Scouts. You'll be issued with your thigh-boots and wicked steampunk goggles whenever. Probably never, if I'm honest, since the budget's... well..." Oh, forget the budget. It was time to show some spirit. "Let's just do this thing!"

### 31. Chapter 31: Shingeki no Hydreigon Et Al

\*\*~Chapter Thirty-one: The Siege of Opelucid City, Part 1! Apologies to Hajime Isayama~\*\*

\_Who...? What...? Where am I?\_

The grass beneath Blake's feet was scattered with fallen leaves. A gentle breeze blew through his hair, and a few wisps of cloud drifted across the sky.

\_I... I know this place.\_

A short way away stood a tall, rugged, sharp-looking tower, like the outstretched talon of some great, upside-down bird.

\_The old watchtower. Braviary's Talon. This... this is Nuvema Town!\_

The ground sloped gently down from the tower, and there, at the edge of Blake's vision, stood three small houses around a cobbled town square, right next to a large, red building. Professor Juniper's laboratory.

The sound of laughter drew Blake's attention away from the architecture. Three small children were running up from the town: a cheerful girl, her pigtails flapping in the wind; a cheerful boy, sadly lacking pigtails; and a less-cheerful boy with glasses and a slightly-too-big scarf.

The children were heading straight for the little hollow by the watchtower. Blake could hear them now, and was startled to hear a voice much like his own:

"Cheren, why've you got your scarf? You look like a person wearing a scarf, which is not a good look for summer."

"I like my scarf, Blake. Scarves are cool," the young Cheren retorted.

\_That's us! Me! I mean them! Us! The Three Nuvemateers!\_

He'd always been proud of that nickname.

Blake (the teenage one having the dream) cried out. "Hey, younger me! When that little boy from Spain comes to visit, DON'T CALL HIM A SPANIEL!"

None of the children gave any indication that they'd heard. Blake watched in silence as they enjoyed a rousing game of Who Can Hold the Most Sticks in One Hand, which Cheren won (as always). They looked about six years old, so they'd have come up with the game no more than a year ago, and Bianca would've moved in about two years ago. It was already as if she'd been in Nuvema Town forever.

A sudden noise made Blake look up to see four more people coming towards them. There was his mum, Ravyn Stormheart, resplendent in blue and gold armour, a belt, a sash, another sash (for luck) and a long, dark blue cape, with a sword hanging from her belt. Mr Redwood was by her side, complaining endlessly about the sword; his beard and shaggy blonde hair were unmistakable, not to mention his knee-pads and life jacket. And behind them walked Cheren's parents, Gerald and Christobel McTavish: a stout-hearted piano salesman and a kind, gentle pro roller-blader.

"Hi, Daddy!" the young Bianca called.

"Don't shout so loud! You'll damage your throat!" Mr Redwood bellowed.

Ravyn gave him a look. "Pot? Kettle? Dark of hue?"

"Shut up," said Mr Redwood.

"Anyway," said Gerald loudly, "you all need to get inside. That's what we were trying to say. There's been a strange, powerful pokémon sighted near here, and... well..."

"You all look delicious," Mr Redwood clarified. "I mean, to the average monster, we're all delicious. I'm not singling you children out or anything. Nevertheless, our lives are in imminent danger."

The young Blake and Bianca gasped in horror, clinging onto one-another. Cheren merely gulped.

\_Strange pokémon? I... I don't... It couldn't've been Tornadus, that happened while Bianca was in her radical feminist phase. What could...?\_ Blake was worried. Had this all happened to him before? He didn't remember anything. Could it just be a dream? Was it a dream that had all happened to him before?!

"Shut up, Mr Redwood," said Christobel brightly. "Let's not worry about... monster appetites and... stuff, we'd better just sort of, well, get inside, just in case, y'know? I mean, it's probably nothing, but-"

There was a loud, slow, splintering crash. A tree fell, then another, and a massive, shadowy figure came bursting out of the woods.

\_What the-?! Is that... I don't know what...\_

The figure walked on two legs, with a long tail and forward-mounted head, standing more than five metres tall. Its tail was tipped with a heavy, axe-like club, big enough to smash a small Egyptian pyramid. Shadows flowed around it, obscuring its skin, and its roar was auto-tuned to smithereens. Blake couldn't tell what species it was, what colour it was... nothing. He was suddenly gripped by a deep, primal fear, and he wanted desperately to run screaming into the woods and then presumably wake up, but he couldn't look away.

"Get behind me!" shouted Ravyn, drawing her sword. The monster leered down at her, showing off an impressive set of teeth. "Ishmael, I'll need you-"

"Don't call me Ishmael!" snapped Mr Redwood. "My name is Mr Redwood. MISTER. REDWOOD. Not Ishmael!"

"Look, just-"

"Bianca, run, like I trained you!" Ishm- sorry, \_Mr Redwood\_ ordered, giving Bianca a shove towards the town. The girl was off like a rocket. Quickly, Mr Redwood grabbed young Blake and Cheren, taking one under each arm. "Hold tight! We're offski!"

"What are you doing?! You're the champion of Kalos! Help!" wailed Ravyn, as the giant pok  mon snatched her sword, sat on her, and used the sword to pick its teeth.

Young Blake struggled in vain against Mr Redwood's arms. "Let me go! I have to help Mummy!"

"And just what are you planning on doing?! It's massive!" demanded Mr Redwood.

"I could lever the monster off her, or perhaps lure it away," the boy said hopefully.

Mr Redwood scoffed. "You'd be its next victim. No, what's best for you is to hide under a table."

The titanic pok  mon shifted its weight. Ravyn yelped in pain, and neither version of Blake could bear to watch a moment longer.

\* \* \*

><p>"Blake?"<p>

"Aaaaaaaaargh!" screamed Blake, awakening with such a start he lurched clean off the bed. He landed roughly on a rugged wooden floor, flattening his nose a little. Wild-eyed, he looked up into the concerned, somewhat bemused face of Iris.

Iris   yes, that's right. It was all coming back to him: the wild ride across the plains, Zephyr trying not to buck him off, Whitney soaring overhead on Sigilyph, Rashimo not envying him   Stacey and Bianca had ridden on Flygon, hadn't they? And Cheren had taken Snorlax, who couldn't half move when it was urgent.

"Blake, it's, uh, time to get up," said Iris. "May I ask why-"

"Bad dream," Blake explained. He was in a dark, dusty attic room, framed by beams of timber, and the bed he'd just fallen off was frankly much too far above the floor.

Iris helped Blake to his feet, letting him get a proper look at the room. Bianca was slumbering in another single bed and Zephyr and Rashimo were asleep on their feet, leaning on one-another under a blanket. The room itself wouldn't have been much to write home about even in better light; as it stood, the single window at the far end was little better than darkness.

Actually, no, it was a lot better than darkness. Blake hadn't even seen the room last night, or at least he presumed not; it was all such a rush, getting to Opelucid City, and the only thing he really remembered was trying to get up the ladder. It had taken Zephyr twelve attempts. And after that, he'd dreamed— An eerie, prophetic dream, of— wait, weren't they being invaded or something?

"Iris, what's happening?! I mean, the siege, the battle! Wherefore?!" demanded Blake, grabbing Iris by the shoulders. "I mean, um— what's going on, exactly?"

"Breakfast, hopefully," declared Bianca, abruptly waking up. "What are we having?"

"I generally have porridge, and Grandpa's partial to roast beef, but there's nowhere near enough for all of us. How about potatoes?" Iris proposed, gently but firmly retrieving her shoulders.

"Potatoes?" Blake frowned. "I suppose maybe hash browns could do it—"

"Uh, about that—" Iris gave a nervous chuckle. "The potato ricer's on the fritz. I tried to use it on some marzipan, and, well—"

\* \* \*

><p>"This," said Cheren superciliously, "is a potato on a stick."<p>

"You're right there." Whitney eyed her breakfast dispassionately. It was a large, round, golden-brown potato, rubbed with salt and impaled on a stick.

Drayden, Iris, Durant and the five trainers were squeezed into what had previously seemed like a spacious dining room, filled with rustic wooden furniture. A roaring hearth cast its warm, friendly glow over the dining table, although the effect was slightly soured by the monolithic fridge-freezer in the corner.

"Cheren's log, Tuesday the twenty-fourth of July: I am eating a potato. On a stick. With a glass of tap water." When Cheren belaboured a point, he belaboured it, all right.

"All complex carbohydrates, no protein, vitamins or fats. A utilitarian breakfast," Stacey elaborated, nibbling on her potato.

"Well, I love them!" squealed Bianca. "Oh, they're soft, warm,

fluffy, brimming with root vegetable goodness! I could eat potatoes on sticks all day!"

"Of course you could," said Cheren heavily. "Considering your brain's made of them, a healthy potato intake is mandatory for you."

"Well, you're a miserable doofus," Bianca eloquently retorted. It was a Tuesday; neither of them could help it.

\* \* \*

><p>While our heroes were enjoying their breakfast, so too was the army gathering in the mountains over Opelucid City. In the chill twilight of dawn, a mighty, three-headed dragon alighted on the coolest-looking ridge. A bouffalant was slung over her back.<p>

"Well met by faint sunlight, proud Annie," the bespectacled pokÃ©mon trainer said solemnly, shutting her book.

"\_Don't call me Annie! My name is Anheidrus'oxyde, or Anheidra for short,\_" the Queen of Victory Road snapped, dropping her breakfast in front of the human. "\_Can I interest you in some fresh bouffalant?\_"

"Uhâ€|" Shauntal knew better than to refuse. If a queen went hunting, then offered you some foodâ€| wellâ€| "You'll forgive me if I cook it first." Hopefully the rest of the Elite Four would never find out.

"\_As you wish.\_" Anheidra tore off a leg and handed it to Shauntal, then set about her feast. Shauntal tried desperately not to pass out.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Honestly! The queen gets her own bouffalant, and all we get are these bananas?!<em>" Deino was not having a good morning.

"\_To be fair, she did kill him herself,\_" Deino's brother Deino pointed out. "\_And I just wouldn't've had the heart to eat the tropius.\_" He handed his sister another banana, which she grudgingly ate. "\_That new general, thoughâ€| I'm not sure about him. The way he hunts, it's almost like heâ€| \_enjoys\_ it. The killing, I mean.\_"

"\_I know,\_" said Deino, shuddering. "\_And he always seems to find the time to leer over his prey.\_"

"\_That guy's raised leering to an art form.\_"

"\_Yeah. What kind of pokÃ©mon is he, anyway?\_"

Deino glanced over at the towering general. He stood five metres tall, an axe-like club on his tail and two massive, serrated, axe-shaped tusks on his head. His scales were sharp and rough, he had an unusual black-and-red complexion, his eyes glowed bright yellow, and his knees were abominably knobbly.

"\_Maybe some sort of haxorus?\_" Deino suggested.

"\_I suppose. There are already three pokÃ©mon in the haxorus line, though, and mega evolution doesn't last that long,\_" Deino pointed out.

"\_He's loyal, though, and the queen trusts him,\_" said Deino.

"\_As far as we know,\_" Deino pointed out.

"\_Yeahâ€¦|\_" said Deino uneasily.

\* \* \*

><p>Drayden was tall and broad. Very broad. If he had an extra pair of arms, he could have passed for a machop. As it stood, Drayden had only two arms, over which he wore a white shirt. His trousers were grey, held in place with black braces, and his shoes were dark grey. His most striking feature, however, was his beard; snow-white, it fanned out over his mouth like some sort of bladed mouth-guard.<p>

"Now, then," said Drayden, tossing his sticks (he was a several-potatoes sort of a fellow) onto the fire, "which of you are the Heroes of Truth and Ideals?"

"Me and her," said Blake, pointing to Whitney.

"He and I," Whitney elaborated, pointing to Blake.

"I see." Drayden looked over his shoulder; Rashimo and Zephyr were grazing in the back garden. "Avatars, are these children the true heroes of legend?"

Zephyr nodded. "Indeed they are."

"The thirty-sixth pair, I believe," said Rashimo.

"Jolly good. Who's Ideals?"

Whitney raised her hand.

"Then you'll be with me," Drayden decided. "Blake, you'll be Iris's second in command. I trust that suits you?"

"Uh, sure. Yes. Fine," said Blake. He was slightly nervous around Drayden, as many people were.

"Suits me, too," said Iris.

"Good. Now, we have little knowledge of what sort of an invasion Opelucid City is about to face, nor how much danger we'll be in, so I feel we must play it safe. My plan involves two teams. Team A will defend the outer wall, which is likely to be the enemy's first target; we will probably be able to figure out where they're coming from. Team B will protect anyone unwilling or unable to fight, which accounts for about ten percent of our population, in the town square. Whitney and I are on Team A." Drayden took in the grim, frightened and/or bright-eyed and bushy-tailed faces around him. "Who feels they'd be best suited to man the walls with me?"

Cheren, Stacey and Bianca raised their hands.

"I shall \_woman\_ the walls," said Bianca firmly.

"I'm goin' with Whitney. We'll thrash the bounders, what!" roared Rashimo, trotting over to Whitney.

"You, uh, can't all be on Team A."

"Well, you're with me, right, Zephyr?" asked Blake.

"For my sins," Zephyr confirmed. "I will, of course, do my utmost to uphold the truth and vanquish the forces of darkness, but let it be known-

"Shut up. Anyway, Cheren, I like the cut of your jib," Drayden went on.

Cheren was taken aback, as was Zephyr, but let's not worry about her right now. "Myâ€| my jib?"

"Yes. That, and the scarf," said Drayden. "It's a good scarf. Just like Mikasa's." He chuckled knowingly. "I'm putting you on Team B. Now, Biancaâ€| something about you tells me you used to have pigtails."

Bianca blinked. "Why, yes!"

"Then you're going on Team A. As for you, Staceyâ€| well, what's your preference?"

"Team A, please," said Stacey. "I am 99.99997354% certain my talents would be of most use at the outer defences."

"Where Whitney is?" said Drayden knowingly.

"Uhâ€| yes. She gives me strength," Stacey insisted.

"I do?! Oh, Stacey, you're so sweet!" declared Whitney.

"Well, you're sweeter!" giggled Stacey.

"Oh, I'm never sweeter. You're as sweet as a barrel of honey!" Whitney gushed.

"You're as sweet as stevia extract, a substance approximately three hundred thousand times sweeter than sugar!" squeaked Stacey.

"Oh, Staceyâ€|" sighed Whitney, tenderly folding her arms around the statistic-loving girl.

"Oh, Whitneyâ€|" agreed Stacey, snuggling up to her sweetheart. "Once the battle's over, let's get married."

"You bet!" said Whitney.

Bianca frowned. "Surely they aren't old enough to get married."

"I don't see why not. I mean, Misty Waterflower became a gym leader when she was eleven, didn't she?" Blake pointed out.

"She remains a great success to this day," Cheren agreed. "Quite a renowned arm-wrestler, too."

"I could take her," muttered Iris.

Drayden gave the table a single resounding thump, bringing everyone's attention instantly back to him. "I think we're getting a little sidetracked. You are aware of the army gathering in the mountains?"

Everyone nodded.

"Good. Let that be your primary concern," said Drayden firmly. "Now, come. We shall assess the situation outside."

\* \* \*

><p>By-and-by, they assessed the situation outside.<p>

"Yeah, I can definitely see a confluence of dragons up there..." muttered Whitney. She handed Cheren the binoculars. He looked through them. He handed Blake the binoculars.

Perched on a small brick wall just outside the pharmacy, right near the edge of town, Blake took his turn on the binoculars. It was hard to make out the details of the pokÃ©mon gathered together, but Blake got the impression of a massive crowd, clustered together in the few flat places up in the mountains. They had the colour schemes of Unova's most common dragon-types: purple, black, red, blue, green and beige, plus a few patches of less-common orange, pale blue and brown. And... reddish-black? Blackish-red?

"There's some kind of... weird haxorus out there. It's pretty big..." Blake slowly lowered the binoculars. "I'll, uh, be defending the town square, right?"

"Yup. Along with me," said Iris, clearly disappointed. "Still, it's a pretty sweet place for parkour. Lots of flat rooves, y'know?"

"I'm glad you find my carefully thought-out battle strategies convenient for having as much fun as possible," said Drayden tetchily. "Perhaps you'll change your tune when a druddigon sits on you..."

Blake was suddenly on edge. "S-sits on her? Why?!"

Drayden raised an eyebrow. "Well, why not?"

"...No reason."

A few tense seconds of silence passed, then Bianca broke the silence.

"I think one of them's coming," said she.

"I daresay you're right," said Zephyr grimly.

Blake looked over her shoulder. The giant haxorus, black and red and just generally nasty-looking, was stalking towards them.



"I do believe it's started," said Drayden. "Iris, take Team B to the town square. Make sure everyone's ready."

"Sir!" Iris swung her legs over the wall, falling over in the process, and got to her feet without a word. She glared at anyone who looked as if they might pass remark, then, satisfied that they wouldn't, she dashed off to the nearest building with a flat rooftop and climbed up on top of it, ignoring the cry of protest from the builder whose roofing-tar she was tracking all over the place.

"Well... should we go after her?" asked Blake, who by now felt completely lost.

"We shall," Cheren decided. "To be honest, I see Iris's point. This is what I was born to do. Leaping from rooftop to rooftop above the ravening hordes below, hurling fire and death down upon them! Hurtling down like an avenging angel to carve the flesh of my startled foes, then swinging back up to the rooftops before they can so much as grasp my scarf! With my sweet serperior by my side, we'd-"

"Oh, just get going!" snapped Drayden.

"And watch where you're stepping!" the builder added.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Well, there he goes,<em>" said Annie. "\_It's ANHEIDRA, you dope,\_" she added pointedly. "\_Either way, Arceusspeed, noble giant mutant haxorus. Arceusspeed.\_"

"Do you actually know his name, or...?" asked Shauntal.

"\_No. At one point, he called himself Herr Bertie Kerschplinty-Vagensvagen von Hautkopff, and at another point, he called himself Mr H. R. Pufnstuf,\_" said Anheidra. "\_However, as far as I can see, his real name is immaterial.\_"

"Oh. That's a pretty name," Shauntal smiled.

"\_You got that from a book, didn't you?\_" said Anheidra.

Shauntal raised her hands in defeat. "You got me."

"\_I did indeed. Still, our colossal friend is a renowned diplomat and an even more renowned warrior, and he can speak Human. If anybody can get through to Drayden, it is he, be it for vengeance or reconcilliation.\_" For the first time since Shauntal had met her, a smile crossed Anheidra's rugged face. "\_I do hope it's vengeance.\_"

"Uh..." Shauntal laughed nervously. "I'm sort of hoping for reconcilliation, actually. I mean, we should really have gone to the police first-"

"\_The \_human\_ police? The ones whose jurisdiction covers your League headquarters? I am sure they would act with honour, but my people need vengeance.\_" She clenched her fists (well, her teeth, anyway).

"\_What Drayden did to us can never be forgiven. I will rend his stupid beard from his face with a single bite!\_"

\* \* \*

><p>As Herr Bertie Something-or-other lumbered ever closer to the wall, Whitney knew she could be silent no longer. The pit of doubt that had been gnawing at her heart was growing ever stronger, and she knew she'd have to say something.<p>

"'Scuse me, Drayden, you know you said only ten percent of the population wouldn't be able to fight?"

"Yes?"

"Well... where are the other ninety percent?" asked Whitney.

Drayden smiled. "Everywhere."

"Everywhere?" Whitney glanced at Stacey, who shrugged. "I'm, uh, not sure I get your meaning..."

"Fair enough, I suppose it was a bit of a cryptic thing to say. What I mean is, pretty much everyone in the city is willing and able to fight anything that gets over the wall," Drayden explained.

"Oh. Well, good for them!" said Whitney.

"What if it \_trips\_ over the wall, though?" Bianca pointed out. Mr Pufnstuf was drawing closer still- there was no hurry- and he already towered over the wall.

"I think he was referring to the much larger, stronger wall a few minutes' walk behind this one," Stacey reassured her. "You did mean that, right, Drayden? Right? Oh, please say that's what you meant."

"Stacey... Dear, sweet, Stacey, who has an unending appetite for statistics... My city's wall has long been the laughing stock of Unova. I'm kind of hoping this battle helps to restore its reputation," Drayden explained.

"Oh," said Stacey.

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Whitney confidently. "In the immortal words of Clarissa Carson, a stonemason renowned for her immortal words, a wall is a wall is a wall is a wall. We'll defend it until the bitter end. For freedom, for justice, for whatever the dragons out there oppose!"

"Well said, old bean. Speakin' of which, the chap's finally got here. You there, haxorus! Speak your piece!" shouted Rashimo.

The colossal haxorus leered, looking down his nose at the warriors from behind a wide, evil, tooth-laden grin. Up close, the jagged spikes on his tusk-axes looked as sharp and deadly as a scyther's blades, and, like his teeth, they were notched and stained with blood.

"...Well? Speak your peace, what!" Rashimo insisted.

The haxorus continued to leer.

"Oh, he's a lost cause. Bally leering people... When push comes to shove, they leer. That's it," sighed Rashimo.

Rashimo's complaints would soon be put to the test, however, for at that moment, the colossal haxorus spoke. "Guten Morgen, Krieger stehend an der Wand. Ich habe im Namen der Königin Anheidrus'oxyde zur Verhandlung kommen. Der dumme Schlampe weiß nicht, Ich spreche Deutsch, aber! Wir werden in Kürze vernichte deine kläglichen Stadt, und mein Herr wird triumphieren. Ist das in Ordnung?"

Drayden stared at him. "...What? Was he speaking German?"

"That's inconvenient," said Whitney nervously.

"Dashed inconsiderate." Rashimo cleared his throat. "Hey, you there! Mein freund! Do... you... speak... Japanese?"

The colossal haxorus laughed. "Watashi wa Å•ku no gengo, watashi no bakkin no yÅ«jin o hanashimasu. Dakede wa nai tadashÅ« mono."

Rashimo's eyes widened. "I don't believe it. He's speaking English!"

"I speak a bit of Korean. Would that work?" said Stacey hopefully.

"Probably not. It'd be too convenient," said Bianca glumly. "Wait a minute, though... PokÅ«mon speak pretty much the same way everywhere. Durant, could you talk to him?"

Durant blinked. "\_I... I didn't think of that.\_"

"Nor did I," said Whitney.

Durant cleared his throat. "\_Hey, you, with the massive tusks! Talk to me!\_"

"\_Und why should I be talkingk to you, miserable little creature zat you are?\_" growled the haxorus. "\_No, I think I vill be goingk now. Zis charade- I mean, uh, perfectly legitimate parley has been goingk on long enough.\_" He raised his head to the skies. "\_Here's your beacon, Annie!\_"

A hyper beam lanced out from his jaws, burning golden-white as it split the heavens. The noise was deafening.

"Ich glaube, wir sind hier fertig. Der Kampf ist im Gange." The Colossal Haxorus laughed. "Viele werden in Ohnmacht fallen, einige werden sterben, alle werden sich erschÅ«pfen, und mein Herr wird im Sturzflug! Annie ist solch ein Dummkopf."

So saying, the Colossal Haxorus surged forwards, tripped over the wall, just barely caught himself and set off for the town square. The deafened warriors who were supposed to be guarding the wall looked on in grim silence.

\* \* \*

><p>"Aaaargh! It's getting closer!"<p>

"Throw the brick! Throw the--"

Half of the apartment block was blasted to rubble.

"\_I'm not doing any damage! Why isn't it working?! I'm a fairy-type!\_"

"I... I don't know..."

The other half of the apartment block fell to the ground, revealing the hideous creature in all his glory.

Cheren lowered the binoculars. "Gentlemen, the, uh, haxorus thingy is coming this way. He seems quite powerful."

"Well, it won't get past us. We're the Opelucid City Survey Scouts, and you know what our solemn duty is!" declared Iris.

"Oh, indeed," said Zephyr. "To have grand adventures, develop self-confidence and practical skills, have fun, get your picture taken with Iris--"

"My point is, we can take him," growled Iris. "I've got five of the most powerful pokÃ©mon in Unova with me. We've never yet--"

A roaring column of light blasted through the rooftop, singeing Iris's thigh-boot and sending Zephyr skidding across the slates. Thinking fast, Blake grabbed her hoof, then immediately regretted it; zebstrikas were \_heavy\_.

Iris looked down at the huddled crowd in the town square. "Don't worry, everyone! It's nothing! Just a minor... incursion? Is that the word?"

"I do believe he's here," said Cheren evenly, although the sweat beading on his forehead betrayed his fear. They were on top of a bungalow, so the giant haxorus still towered over them.

"Guten Tag. Ich bin der Colossal Haxorus, Diener des Dunklen Lords. Seid ihr das Essen?" the beast asked.

"Essen?" Zephyr spat. "Nein, wir sind die JÃ¤ger! Blake, get me onto my feet. I can't believe the nerve of him, implying we're a bunch of Essens."

"Does this mean you speak German?" asked Iris, as Blake and Cheren helped Zephyr right herself.

"A little," replied Zephyr. She glared down at the Colossal Haxorus with a spark in her eyes. "Harken zu mir, du bÃ¶ses Tier. Wir sind die JÃ¤ger, HonÅ• no yÅ• ni atsuku! Wir sind die JÃ¤ger, KÅ•ri no yÅ• ni hiyayaka ni! Ich weiÃŸ, was du bist und wer du bist fÃ¼r die Arbeit, und ich lasse dich nicht Ã¼ber diese Stadt zu triumphieren."

The Colossal Haxorus flinched. She knew German and English?! How did

she even know \_he\_ knew English?! And did it even matter, since that was such a cool song?!

"Oh, ja, ich bin flieÃŸend in Ihrer Sprache," said Zephyr smugly. "Hochdeutsch, Niederdeutsch, dem Ã¶sterreichischen Dialekt, Englisch, sogar die schrecklichen Sachen, die Sie von zu bekommen Google Translate. Und ich weiÃŸ, dass Sie fÃ¼r Ghetsis arbeiten."

"Ghetsis?!" Blake was completely lost. "What about him?! Zephyr, what are you on about?"

"This so-called Colossal so-called Haxorus is working for Ghetsis," Zephyr explained. "You, Colossal Haxorus, had the arrogance to declare whilst speaking German that you work for the Dark Lord. Did it ever occur to you that someone else might speak German?"

"Nein..."

"Well, you should probably consider it next time," said Zephyr. "In the meantime, have a thunderbolt on me!"

A million volts lanced out from Zephyr's mane, crashing down on the Collosal Haxorus. He lunged at her, fire spilling from his jaws, only to chomp thin air as Zephyr leapt over his head.

"Come on! We've got to help Zephyr!" declared Cheren. "Serperior, I choose you!"

Serperior materialised, the flash of light startling the giant evil haxorus.

"You too, Druddigon!" yelled Iris, releasing her pokÃ©mon, a broad, craggy druddigon.

Blake vaguely recalled an incident where a group of rowdy hydreigons had tried to attack Nuvema Town. They were later found unconscious in his back garden, plus one other pokÃ©mon. He grabbed a pokÃ©-ball. "Carlos, I choose you!"

"\_You think you can be facingk me?!\_" the Colossal Haxorus laughed. "\_I am ze greatest of all ze, uh, completely normal pokÃ©mon vithout any connections to mad science und stuff. I vill be obliteratingk your city und destroyingk you all. Ze Colossal Haxorus is not knowingk mercy. Be prepairingk to die!\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"Well, that's one got past," said Whitney, once her hearing had mostly recovered. "I'm sure Blake, Cheren, Iris, Zephyr and the rest of the gang'll deal with it, though."<p>

There was a splintering crash. Whitney glanced nervously over her shoulder to see a bus, upended, on top of a flattened video game shop.

"I fear he may just have been the maelstrom before the relatively gentler, yet much larger storm," said Drayden grimly. "Look."

The dragons were surging down from the mountains. There must have been thousands, roaring, pushing and shoving, kicking up such a dustcloud behind them as could blot out the Sun. And they were coming straight towards Opelucid City. Obviously.

"Remind me, why is it just us five on the wall?" said Bianca nervously.

"Watch and learn, girl with beret. Watch and learn," said Drayden smugly. He pulled a megaphone from his pocket, raised it to his lips and shouted. "Opelucid City, arise! The dragons with whom we have so long held peace appear to have gone berserk, and we are in their path. They charge hence, and we shall repel them. We must! For our livelihoods, our future, we will defend this city to the last man! Or woman, of course. Anyway, prepare for battle!"

"FOR BATTLE, WE'RE PREPAIRING!" the people of Opelucid City roared, leaping out of every doorway, from behind every tree and car, even from some pretty nifty cloaking devices. All in all, there must have been thousands: greengrocers, computer programmers, homemakers, carpenters, loads of pokÃ©mon, builders, ballet dancers, plumbers, stonemasons, firefighters, chefs. There were several Officers Jenny, and indeed a plentitude of warriors, sorcerors and dragons. A thousand swords cut the air, a thousand plasma rifles and ray-guns (lisenced, of course) were raised skywards, a thousand pokÃ©-balls were made ready. One fellow even had a baguette.

"Oh, my gosh..." breathed Whitney.

"They're the ninety percent, right?" said Stacey.

"Correct," Drayden confirmed. "We have a pretty fearsome populace."

The dragon army was drawing closer. The rumble of their feet on the ground was growing louder and louder; soon it would be hard to hear each other above the din.

Stacey nudged Whitney. "We're getting married after this, right?"

"Oh, definitely," said Whitney. "They won't get past us. I won't let them hurt you."

"Nor I you." Stacey smiled, squeezing Whitney's hand. "Or Bianca. We can't let her get hurt."

"Her dad would kill us," Whitney agreed. "I mean, not that he'd have a chance against me normally, but I might be tired after the battle..."

By-and-large, the dragons smashed through, crashed into, jumped over, tripped over or pounced over the wall. Yes indeedy, Whitney reflected, this would be a tiring battle.

\*\*To be continued...\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Oh, by the way, translations for the foreign-language

text in today's chapter are below. Feel free to peruse them; they may enlighten you a little.<strong>

Guten Morgen, Krieger stehend an der Wand. Ich habe im Namen der Königin Anheidrus'oxyde zur Verhandlung kommen. Der dumme Schlampe weiß nicht, Ich spreche Deutsch, aber! Wir werden in Kürze vernichte deine kläglichen Stadt, und mein Herr wird triumphieren. Ist das in Ordnung?

Good morning, warriors standing on the wall. I have come on behalf of Queen Anheidrus'oxyde to negotiate. The stupid old fart doesn't know I speak German, though! We will shortly crush your pitiful city, and my lord will triumph. Is that okay?

Watashi wa Å•ku no gengo, watashi no bakkin no yÅ«jin o hanashimasu. Dakede wa nai tadashÅ« mono.

I speak many languages, my fine friend. Just not the right ones.

Ich glaube, wir sind hier fertig. Der Kampf ist im Gange. Viele werden in Ohnmacht fallen, einige werden sterben, alle werden sich erschöpfen, und mein Herr wird im Sturzflug! Annie ist solch ein Dummkopf.

I think we're done here. The battle's afoot. Many will faint, some will die, all will exhaust themselves, and then my lord will swoop in! Annie is such a fool.

Guten Tag. Ich bin der Colossal Haxorus, Diener des Dunklen Lords. Seid ihr das Essen?

Good day. I am the Colossal Haxorus, servant of the Dark Lord. Are you the prey?

Nein, wir sind die Jäger!

No, we are the hunters!

Harken zu mir, du böses Tier . Wir sind die Jäger, HonÅ• no yÅ• ni atsku! Wir sind die Jäger, KÅ•ri no yÅ• ni hiyayaka ni! Ich weiß, was du bist und wer du bist für die Arbeit , und ich lasse dich nicht über diese Stadt zu triumphieren.

Harken to me, you evil beast. We are the hunters, passionate as flames! We are the hunters, cold as ice! I know what you are and who you're working for, and I won't let you triumph over this city.

Oh, ja, ich bin fließend in Ihrer Sprache. Hochdeutsch, Niederdeutsch, dem Österreichischen Dialekt, Englisch, sogar die schrecklichen Sachen, die Sie von zu bekommen Google Translate. Und ich weiß, dass Sie für Ghetsis arbeiten.

Oh, yes, I am fluent in your language. High German, Low German, the Austrian dialect, English, even the awful stuff you get from Google Translate. And I know you work for Ghetsis.

Nein...

No...

## 32. Chapter 32: The Shingeki Drags On

\*\*~Chapter Thirty-two: The Siege of Opelucid City, Part 2! With More Apologies to Hajime Isayama~\*\*

**\*\*Content warning:\*\*** This chapter is a bit more violent and scary than usual. I believe it is still suitable for a K+ rating, but if you're among my more sensitive readers you might want to be careful.

\* \* \*

><p>"Gyro ball! Let's go!"<p>

Carlos's eyes sparkled. Gyro ball was most effective when used by a slow pokÃ©mon, and few things were slower than a ferroseed. He spun lazily towards the Colossal Haxorus, glowing silvery green.

"Serperior, latch on to him with vine whip and use leaf blade!"

"Druidigon, use dragon claw!"

Serperior shot forward, vines lashing out from her waste to wrap around some sticky-out bits of the Colossal Haxorus's armour. Druidigon charged, raising his claws.

"Don't forget about me. Flame charge!" Zephyr yelled, charging flamily towards her enemy.

The Colossal Haxorus roared with laughter. "\_Vhat part of "apologies to Hajime Isayama" aren't you understandingk?!\_"

Blake looked at Iris. "What did he just say?"

"I couldn't tell. His accent's completely-"

The Colossal Haxorus used hyper beam.

\* \* \*

><p>"How long have we been fighting this war? A year? Two?"<p>

Whitney was caked with mud, sweat and miscellaneous filth, far moreso than normal. All her muscles ached, half her hair had been pulled out, she was bruised in twelve different places, bleeding in five places, and she'd stubbed her toe really badly. She'd used metal claw so many times she could barely feel her fingers.

"Twenty-one minutes, seventeen point three seconds," said Stacey weakly. "The dragons are having their tea break right now. It's due to last for forty minutes."

They were huddled together behind one of the few pieces of the wall still standing. All around them, the ground was scarred and burnt. Houses were reduced to rubble, some still burning, and no-one had escaped without injury.



"Where's Bianca?" asked Stacey.

"I think she's making everyone tea," said Whitney.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Durant scuttled over. He was filthy and dented in several places, but his eyes glowed brightly.

"Hi, there. How's it going?" asked Whitney.

"\_We've finished the main trench and most of the supply trenches, but we're not quite done. Shouldn't you be helping out, by the way? I mean, you have a magic trowel...\_"

"It broke. I had to improvise with those last few dragons," said Whitney apologetically.

"\_I get it,\_" huffed Durant. "\_You're too good to work with pokÃ©mon. Arceus forbid you should get filthy digging trenches and stuff. I don't know... Teenagers called Whitney these days...\_"

With that, Durant wandered off.

"I know he means well, but that's one sarcastic durant you're training," Stacey commented.

"Yup," Whitney agreed.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes until Bianca came by with some tea, which they drank. Then they continued to sit in silence.

"Ah, Stacey, Whitney! I thought I'd find you here," said Drayden, striding over. "How are your pokÃ©mon shaping up?"

"Durant and Weezing are well enough to fight, but Sigilyph's fainted, and Reuniclus is paralysed," replied Whitney.

"All of mine've fainted," said Stacey dolefully. "Except Skorupi, I mean. She's approximately 45.8734209% tougher than the average skorupi, so, yeah..."

"I see. It's not going to well, if I'm honest. Most of the younger, weaker dragon-types have gone home for tea and crumpets, but the stronger ones have barely showed their true power. We haven't even seen the queen yet," said Drayden grimly.

"Well, maybe someone should go and talk to them," Whitney suggested. "I mean, while they're having their tea break-"

"Great of you to volunteer! I'd expect no less of Rodney Blazeheart's daughter," said Drayden bullishly.

"...What of Rodney Blazeheart?" asked Whitney suspiciously.

"Didn't you know? He's the head of cybersecurity for the whole of Unova. He once fought a whole battalion of porygon-Zs barehanded."

"Really?!"

"But of course."

"Well." Whitney let that sink in. "I still hate him. Stacey, wanna come and parley with the dragons, preferably not in German?"

"I suppose..."

"Great." Ignoring the protests from all over her body, Whitney rose to her feet. Cupping her hands over her mouth, she called out, "Hey, Rashimo, we're going to negotiate with the dragon army! You wanna come?!"

"Gladly!" came the reply, and Rashimo trotted over. "After you, what."

\* \* \*

><p>"Nice hyper beam. I almost felt it," said Zephyr tersely, dusting herself off. "However, you're no match for-"<p>

The Colossal Haxorus used dragon tail.

"Aaaargh!" screamed Zephyr, her voice dwindling as she sailed into the distance.

"Well, there she goes..." said Iris nervously.

"Indeed. I'll miss her. Nice dodge there, by the way," said Cheren, giving Serperior a smile. Serperior smirked snivishly from her perch on the Colossal Haxorus's shoulder.

Blake's attention returned to Carlos. "Are you okay?"

Carlos gave a curt nod.

"Great. Then get him before-"

The Colossal Haxorus used fire fang.

"Carlos! Speak to me!" wailed Blake.

Doing his best to ignore the chaos unfolding around him, Druddigon tore at the Colossal Haxorus with claws of dragon-fire, scoring a few marks across his scales. The Colossal Haxorus leered down at him.

"\_Why don't you stop leering and do something productive for a change?\_" growled Druddigon, chomping down on his enemy's knee.

"\_If you are likingk,\_" said the Colossal Haxorus breezily. In a flash, his hands were around Druddigon's throat. "\_Zis is vhat I am callingk crush claw. Now, how much energy are you havingk left? Enough to be keepingk up your structural integrity field? I am thinkingk not.\_" He squeezed with all his might.

Rage surged up from Iris's heart. "No! Don't you dare!"

"I think he's already daring. Quick, Serperior, use-"

The Colossal Haxorus's tail lashed up at Serperior, knocking her to the ground. His grip didn't loosen in the slightest.

Blake tried his hardest not to panic. Druddigon's face was going blue, but what he needed was calm, sensible action at the quickest possible pace. "Georgina, I choose y-"

Once more, the Colossal Haxorus's tail tore through the air as he spun on his heel, knocking Blake for six. The ground battered Blake as he tumbled through a wooden fruit stall.

Iris quickly thumbed the button on Druddigon's poké-ball, preparing herself to jump over any long, muscular tails swung in her direction. \_I really should've thought of this sooner. Sorry, Druddigon.\_

Gasping with relief, Druddigon flopped down on the floor of the poké-ball, making a mental note never to tease a leering pokémon again.

"I'm sick of you, so-called Colossal so-called Haxorus," growled Iris. "Betty, Armaldo, Garchomp, normal-sized Haxorus, let's go!"

Iris's four remaining pokémon burst out of their poké-balls. Betty immediately took to the air, her muscular red wings beating ferociously.

"Hit him with everything you've got!" Iris ordered, giving the air in front of her an encouraging punch. Garchomp and the good haxorus charged, their claws and axe-tusks blazing with light. Armaldo grabbed the Colossal Haxorus's leg and shoved with all her might, muscles heaving beneath her armour plating. Betty surged forward, aiming straight for the neck.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, uh, this is the dragon army," said Stacey nervously. She could feel the gazes of countless disgruntled pokémon boring into her. The dragons were taking tea in a cluster of pine trees near the so-called city wall. To Stacey, it might as well have been the gateway to the Distortion Realm.<p>

"We mean you no harm, me old draconic muckers," Rashimo assured the army. "We're here to speak with Queen Anheidrus'oxyde, what?"

A zweilous gestured grudgingly to a clearing nearby. The trio made their anxious way deeper into the forest, emerging at last to see the queen in all her glory. She was bigger and scarier than any of the other hydreigons around, complete with painstakingly sharpened teeth. A young woman with close-cropped purple hair stood beside her, decked out in wide, round glasses, a purple dress, black leggings and hiking-boots.

"Oh, my gosh! It's Shauntal! It's really her!" Stacey shrieked. "Oh, wow, this is the fourth-greatest day of my life!" Eyes shining, Stacey ran forward and grasped Shauntal's hands, gazing adoringly up into her dumbstruck face. "I love your books, Shauntal. You're so great! You're just so incredible and witty and charming and great at

drama and romance and stuff, and you have such a deep understanding of the human condition! Oh, how I worship the very ground on which you walk!"

So saying, Stacey pulled Shauntal into a warm, loving embrace.

Anheidra contemplated Stacey. "\_Well, this is... unorthodox.\_"

"Weird," agreed Rashimo.

So Shauntal was there. Shauntal O'Keefe, the Elite Four's ghost-type pokÃ©mon expert and also a published author. Whitney didn't like to dwell on these things. "I wouldn't worry about it. Stacey's more well-adjusted than she may seem," Whitney reassured everyone. "Anyway, I'm Whitney Blazeheart, the Hero of Ideals. I've come on behalf of Opelucid City to negotiate with you."

"\_Oh, really?\_" Queen Anheidrus'oxyde narrowed her eyes. "\_You can tell Drayden he'll have peace only when he pays for the lives he's destroyed. Victory Road, my people, the Elite Four, Skyla's favourite fighter jet... So much was lost, and all because of his arrogance! His cruelty! His madness! How dare he?! I will rend his stupid beard from his face with a single bite!\_"

"...I'm sorry, what? What did Drayden ever do?" demanded Whitney.

"\_As if you don't know.\_" Anheidra loomed over Whitney. She could smell blood and lemon-scented mouthwash on the hydreigon's breath, flowing past a pair of fangs as big as smallish daggers. The queen's purple crest seemed to fill the air, her burning red eyes shining through the darkness of-

"Oh, for pity's sake, I haven't the faintest idea what Drayden did to you! Now, I don't know about you, but being intimidated doesn't magically give me new insights into the events leading up to this war. Are you just throwing your weight around, or are you actually gonna tell me anything?!" Whitney fumed.

"\_...Fine. Shauntal, show her the letters, would you?\_"

Gently but firmly extricating herself from Stacey, Shauntal took two neatly folded letters out of her pocket. Whitney took the letters and read one.

"To the pokÃ©mon of Victory Road, we, the Elite Four of Unova, pledge to exterminate you. If you wish to offer some pathetic resistance against our fury, gather outside the PokÃ©mon League headquarters tomorrow at dawn, when we plan to attack. Yours, with hatred, Grimsley, Shauntal, Caitlin and Marshall. (Alder's still missing.)"

Her brow furrowing, Whitney set about the other letter. "Dear so-called Elite so-called Four: I, Anheidrus'oxyde, Queen of Victory Road, do hereby declare war on you. If you have the unmitigated gall to stand up to me, meet my army outside your so-called PokÃ©mon so-called League so-called headquarters, where we will attack at dawn. We will wipe you from the face of the Earth. Yours insincerely,

Annie. xoxoxoxoxoxox."

"\_I would never sign a letter as "Annie",\_" Anheidrus'oxyde ground out. "\_Nor would I include that pointless xoxoxoxox business.\_"

"Nor would we be in a hurry to exterminate anything," agreed Shauntal. "However, if you notice, these letters are both written in the same hand."

"And, uh, whose hand would that be?" asked Whitney, with a sinking feeling.

"Drayden's," replied Shauntal. "I have no idea what he was thinking-"

"\_Which is irrelevant. Whatever he was thinking, I fully intend to rend his stupid beard from his face with a single bite,\_" Anheidra insisted.

"Well, this is, uh, food for thought," said Whitney. "Can we have these letters? I'd like to show Drayden-"

"\_If you so much as touch one, you're history,\_" said Anheidra.

"...Look, if we could compare these with Drayden's handwriting, get some more evidence-"

"\_I'll have you for a pizza topping.\_"

Scattered cheers arose from the watching pokÃ©mon.

Whitney narrowed her eyes. "You wouldn't dare."

Anheidra used dragonbreath. Whitney ducked.

"I, uh, I think she might dare," said Stacey nervously, laying a hand on Whitney's arm.

"Well, she won't get anywhere with me," said Whitney confidently. "Besides, I taste awful. You said so yourself."

"But... but you can't've recovered from the fighting already, and she's huge and terrifying!"

"\_Thank you,\_" said Anheidra.

"Look, Stacey, if we let her frighten us, she's basically won. It's like Cheren said after that incident in the Desert Resort. If we submit to evil, if we allow it to control us without having to fight us first, evil wins. And what's more, we'd be responsible for letting it win, since we didn't try to fight back. I won't let that happen," Whitney explained. There was fire in her eyes, and Stacey knew there was no way she could talk Whitney out of fighting the queen.

However, she could still talk Anheidra out of fighting Whitney. It was a long shot, and she'd have to think on her feet, but Stacey knew she could do it. She was a master of words rather than action, and she knew almost a million words (including Korean ones); more than

enough, surely?

"Mighty Anheidrus'oxyde, I implore you, hold your fire!" shouted Stacey, stepping smartly in front of Whitney. "We mean you no harm, o great queen. I completely understand your anger towards Drayden, and I cannot say for sure that he is innocent, but don't we both want this to end peacefully? Don't we both want to stop the loss of innocent lives?"

For a moment, something resembling regret crossed Anheidra's face, but it was swiftly replaced with more anger. "\_There are no innocent lives in Opelucid City. They all have the blood of my people on their hands.\_"

"And Grimsley," Shauntal pointed out.

"\_True. Grimsley is presumed dead, having borrowed Skyla's best aeroplane and having subsequently crashed it into a mountain. Before his crash, however, he bombed forty of my people. They all died.\_"

Stacey's heart skipped a beat. "Forty...? D-did you mean fourteen?"

"\_FORTY!\_"

"But how-?!" Stacey's voice caught. "S-Shauntal, did you know?!"

"Uh..."

"\_She knew. You have Grimsley a lucky horseshoe to hang in the cockpit, didn't you?\_" Anheidra reminded Shauntal. Shauntal hung her head in shame.

"I can't believe it. Forty-one people and a fighter plane...!" Stacey sobbed. "How could this happen?! Shauntal, you beast! YOU SHOULD'VE STOPPED HIM!" Stacey threw her arms around Whitney, weeping into her shoulder.

"Oh, Stacey, I can hardly believe it myself, but..." Whitney had no words for so much death, nor so many tears on Stacey's part. "We... We can't let any more people get hurt."

"\_Except Drayden and his stupid granddaughter,\_" Anheidra reminded everyone.

"You leave Iris out of this, you hear me?!" yelled Stacey, turning to face the queen. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but her face was red with anger. "I... I can't possibly know how badly it must hurt to lose forty of your people. You must all be infuriated, but killing more people won't make the pain go away. And you can trust me on that. I know psychology." Stacey clenched her fists, then, realising this would look bad, unclenched them. "We won't let you hurt anyone else. Have us for dinner if you must, but please be reasonable about this. If I die, the very last words on my lips will be a heartfelt prayer for a safe, peaceful future for people and pokÃ©mon the world over!"

Anheidra narrowed her eyes. "\_People \_and \_pokÃ©mon? Meaning the two

are separate categories, and that pok  mon are therefore not people?\_"

"Uh... that's not exactly what-"

Anheidra used hyper beam.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Four against vun? Really, Iris, a gym leader should be knowingk better.<em>" Flashing a savage grin, the Colossal Haxorus used outrage.

Iris smirked. "I'm knowingk a lot better than you think. Armaldo, protect! Garchomp, sand attack!"

Planting her feet, Armaldo drew all her energy into an unbreakable shield, stopping the Colossal Haxorus in his tracks. The monster let out a savage roar, drew back his head and slammed a glowing tusk upon the shield, making Armaldo shrink back in terror just as Garchomp flew overhead, tossing an armful of sand into the Colossal Haxorus's face.

"That was guillotine, wasn't it?" commented Blake. He'd brushed most of the fruit off his clothes, so it was probably time to get back into the fray.

"Guillotine, schmuillotine. As you can see, he's no match for us. I'm the proud owner of five of the most bodacious pok  mon in the known universe, and noting can-"

The Colossal Haxorus used dual chop.

"\_My fin! My fin!\_" wailed Garchomp, staring in horror as the Colossal Haxorus sharpened his claws on their severed fin.

"It'll grow back! Oh, Garchomp, this wasn't my plan at all!" Iris sort of reassured him a little.

"\_Say, is anyone fancyingk some garchomp's-fin soup?\_" the Colossal Haxorus laughed. "\_Some for you, unconscious salamence?\_"

"\_I'm not unconsc-\_" Betty began.

The Colossal Haxorus used dragon claw.

"Spoke too soon," said Cheren glumly.

"Shut up!" snapped Iris, who looked to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"\_And now to ze annoyingk armaldo. Tell me, mein frau, how many times haff you been usingk protect?\_"

"\_Five times now. Why-\_"

The Colossal Haxorus used dragon claw.

"\_Y-you'll never get away with this, you big bully! You're a disgrace to all haxoruses!\_" the good haxorus declared, trying to keep his

knees from knocking.

"\_Haxori,\_" the Colossal Haxorus corrected him, absentmindedly knocking him out with dual chop. "\_So, Iris, what were you sayingk?\_"

"I..." Iris felt as if her heart had dropped down to her stomach and landed quite heavily. "I'm so sorry. Grandpa... Wise and bodacious Drayden, I... I failed you. I failed everyone!" The large-haired girl fell to her knees. Bitter tears trickled down her cheeks. "I'm the worst teenage gym leader known to wear thigh-boots as part of her uniform ever, and I've known some real stinkers in that category. I wish I were dead."

"Well, then. I suppose it falls to me now." Blake knew Iris would be fine; she wasn't one to fall into despair, even though she loved moping from time to time. He looked up into the leering face of the Colossal Haxorus. His pulse quickened. "I mean, I am the Hero of Truth." All the blood drained from his face. "And it'd impress Chloe. I suppose I should fight him now. Yes, that might be a good idea. Um."

"Well, get on with it! I'll back you up," said Cheren impatiently, giving Blake a little shove towards the enemy.

"...Okay." Blake retrieved his rolling pin. "Take this!"

Blake's strike caught the Colossal Haxorus off-guard. He howled in pain as the boy's rolling pin collided with his knee, then lashed out with a clawed foot to slash Blake's head off. Seeing the foot coming for him, Blake somersaulted back out of reach, careful to avoid any fruit stall debris, and hurled an aura sphere into the Colossal Haxorus's face.

"\_Gaaahhhh! Mein eyes!\_" the beast wailed.

"Have seen the glory of the coming of the Llama Queen?" Cheren smirked, using the ever-so-slightly blasphemous nickname for Arceus. "Good show there, by the way. I daresay his knees are thoroughly knobbled."

"Well, it's not that hard," said Blake, blushing a little. "I mean, if you've got natural talent with Aura-"

The Colossal Haxorus sat on him.

\* \* \*

><p>"Letters? I never sent any letters!" Drayden was fuming. "As if I'd betray everything I hold dear like this, instigating a pointless war for... some reason, or something. Or anything. As if!"<p>

"Well, could we see some of yer handwritin', what? As counter-evidence?" Rashimo suggested.

"Fine. Let's see, um..." Drayden rummaged in his pockets for a few seconds, producing at last a small scrap of paper. He held it up to Rashimo.

"Two boxes eggs, one loaf bread, three sacks potatoes, one roast ox,



one packet porridge oats, twelve boxes pokémon food, one packet special-edition Swiss cheese without any holes... I think you get the idea," Rashimo read aloud. "A bally shopping list? Is that the best you could do?"

"I hadn't exactly planned for this."

"Either way, we now have a perfect example of Drayden's handwriting," said Whitney confidently. "All we need now is the letters. Which Queen Annie won't give us under any circumstances."

"Not a great situation, all things considered," Bianca commented.

"Well, there must be something we can do. I mean, the dragons have no proof you wrote the letters," Whitney insisted.

"They don't need any proof. Dragon-type pokémon are notoriously stubborn," said Drayden glumly. "Even if we can prove I didn't write those letters, Anheidrus'oxyde might not be persuaded to call off the attack."

"She was a real bully. No sense of when to... not be a bully," Stacey agreed. "I can't understand why Shauntal was with her, though..."

"That could work to our advantage, actually. A person has to go through rigorous character testing before they can join the Elite Four, so we're bound to get some reason out of them." Drayden tapped a passer-by on the shoulder. "Michael, can you get on the blowpipe to the Pokémon League headquarters and ask what this is all about?"

The man Drayden had stopped nodded, discarded his basket of citrus berries and charged off to the nearest phone box.

Drayden turned to Whitney. "Just one more thing: how did you escape from Anheidrus'oxyde's forces?"

"Well, her hyper beam almost finished us off, but the subsequent tri attack missed, and we sort of legged it."

"Ah, right."

\* \* \*

><p><em>Oh, crikey, he's heavy. So heavy! I feel like my whole body's being crushed. Which makes sense, since my whole body <em>is\_ being crushed. Oh, why did I ever come here?! Why didn't I stay safe and sound at home in Nuvema Town?!\_

Such were Blake's thoughts as he lay in severe pain beneath the Colossal Haxorus's rear end.

\_It shouldn't've been this way. I'm the Hero of Ideals, for Arceus's sake! ...And I've been so for less than a month. I'm hopelessly outclassed. Samantha, Darren, everyone, get out while you still can. I'm done for. I want my mummy!\_

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as Mr Redwood was out of earshot, Blake, Bianca and Cheren ran to the window.<p>

\_...What? This again, now?! I... I don't... Uh, why, exactly? I mean... why?!\_

Blake drifted unseen past his younger self, phasing through the window. This was another dream. Could his life be flashing before his eyes or something?

His mum was still trapped under the giant pok  mon, Cheren's parents were desperately throwing stones at it; it was the same as before.

No, not quite the same. He could see the giant pok  mon. Its scales were black and red, its teeth were sharp and filthy, its tail bore an axe-like club-

\_IT'S HIM! OH, MY ARCEUS!\_

\* \* \*

><p>Long-forgotten memories fountained up from the depths of Blake's mind. The Colossal Haxorus. He'd stormed into Nuvema Town, sat on his mother, terrified everyone, and for what? It worried Blake. No, it infuriated him.<p>

"You... You evil, hateful globule of pangoro earwax...!"

The Colossal Haxorus shifted his weight, flattening Blake against the cobblestones.

\* \* \*

><p>Ravyn was struggling ferociously, but to no avail. So was Blake.<p>

\_How can he sit on two people from the same family like this?! How dare he?! I so badly want to sit on him, see how he likes it, but how can I? It's hopeless. Aaaargh, I hate hopelessness, but I have no hope! I hate this!\_

For a few seconds, Ravyn's body went limp. Then she redoubled her thrashing, tipping the Colossal Haxorus clean over.

\_What?! How?!\_

"I play Dance Dance Revolution for four hours a day. Stamina is my middle name," said Ravyn savagely, forcing herself to her feet. "You are a fool, attacking a Stormheart in the prime of her life." A blue glow flared up around Ravyn's hands, coalescing into two long, razor-sharp seamitars. "By the power of my ancestors, prepare to fall!"

\_But... how? How's she doing this?!\_

"I'll give you three guesses, and the first two don't count." Ravyn winked. "I'm proud of you, Blake. Be the Aura Guardian I know you are."

\_What if I don't want to?\_

"Well... that'd be a huge bummer."

Ravyn tore into the Colossal Haxorus. Neither she nor her son had ever willingly suffered a huge bummer, that he knew. Blake made his choice.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Stop wriggling! It'll only be makingk your death all ze more painful. Vait, what am I sayingk? Keep wriggling! I am vantingk your death to be as painful as possible!<em>" the Colossal Haxorus gloated, his bulk steadfastly resisting Blake's struggles.

"You are a fool, attacking a Stormheart in the prime of his life. I'll sit on you until you cry!" Blake roared, a little hoarse from all the growling he'd done already. With an almighty heave, he forced himself onto his hands and knees, almost upending the Colossal Haxorus.

"\_Vas ist das?! How can you resist me even now?!\_" the titanic monster cried.

"Because I can! The Hero of Truth needs no reason to fight the forces of evil. He simply has to \_be\_."

"\_...Vhat?\_"

"I am a Knight of Aura, like my mother before me. She's probably gonna be quite smug when this is all over, but I don't care. I won't waste my breath telling you why I resist you, nor why I have the strength to do so, but-"

"\_But you vill be vastingk your breath with all zese stupid rants?\_"

"SHUT UP!"

A shimmering blue aura of Aura flared up around Blake. Lightning flashed through his hair, shredding his hair-ribbon, as he rose inexorably to his feet.

"\_Hoi! Be puttingk me down!\_" the Colossal Haxorus wailed.

"Gladly," said Blake, and he hurled the Colossal Haxorus clean across the town square. The terrified crowd parted as the haxorus smashed into the typewriter shop, showering the square with rubble, glass and ink. "Colossal Haxorus, you're AXED!"

Triumphant, Blake roared with laughter.

"Honestly, I would've felt better if he'd thrown him the other way," Iris commented. "He deserves this moment, though. How bodacious!"

"\_Oh, mein head...\_" the Colossal Haxorus groaned. "\_I am beingk impressed, Stormheart-in-ze-prime-of-his-life. Where did zis strength come from?\_"

Blake shrugged. "Who knows?"

"\_Zen, uh, how exactly-\_"

"Like I said, because I can." Blue light flashed through the air, shaping two long, sharp swords in Blake's hands. "At least, I suppose so. There's probably a better reason, if I'm honest, but I don't know what it is."

The Colossal Haxorus gave Blake a heavy look.

Blake retrieved a pok  -ball (with his mouth, since his hands were both full of sword). "Smmnfmrr, mm chmmz ymmm!"

With a flash of light, Samantha materialised in front of Blake, looking at him in confusion. "\_Is your throat all right?\_"

"Long story. I've kind of awakened some special powers from deep within my heart, so, um... yeah."

"\_Oh, okay. We're fighting that big fellow, right?\_" Samantha laid an encouraging paw on Blake's shoulder. In that moment, he could feel her Aura more clearly than ever before; bright, fierce, with a strange smell of greenish-blue. Energy pooled where her paw touched his shoulder, sliding through the air in ever-stranger patterns. It was almost blinding, almost painful-

Samantha gasped. Blake gasped. The connection broke.

"Blimey," said Blake, in a small voice.

"\_That was really far-out, man,\_" agreed Samantha. "\_Let's give it another try!\_"

"\_Nein!\_" cried the Colossal Haxorus. For a split second, there was fear in his eyes. "\_I mean, uh... don't you be daringk, puny human und samurott. I will be destroyingk you posthaste, I am thinkingk. Ja, das ist vhat I will be doingk!\_"

Tensing himself for another onslaught of Aura, Blake reached out a hand to Samantha (after dismissing the sword, of course). Samantha took his hand with a firm grip. In an instant their Auras joined. They were one. A galaxy of colour and energy swirled through Samantha's heart, so close Blake felt as if he could reach out and touch it.

"\_Hey, reach out with your newly-discovered senses and touch your own heart!\_" Samantha protested.

"Okay, sorry! Uh, do you have any ideas regarding that big fellow?"

"\_Hydro cannon?\_"

"How do we do that?"

"\_It's simple. I supply the hydro, you supply the cannon.\_"

Blake blinked.

"\_Okay, it might not be \_that\_ simple,\_" Samantha conceded. "\_What I'm going to do is give you as much water as I can muster. You need to shape that water into something resembling a cannonball, then hurl it in our enemy's general direction.\_"

Sensing imminent humiliating defeat, the Colossal Haxorus lunged forwards. He did not get far, however, before being intercepted by a hundred kilogrammes of ice punch.

"Keep him off, Snorlax! Do whatever it takes!" ordered Cheren. He glanced back at Blake and Samantha. "Whatever you're planning, do it with haste. Iris will cheer you on."

"I will not!" Iris protested, casting aside the pompoms Cheren had forced into her hands.

"You have no pokÃ©mon currently fit to battle. How else are you going to participate?!" Cheren protested.

"I'll watch," said Iris firmly.

"Well, give me the pompoms!" snapped Cheren.

Doing her best to ignore the two idiots, Samantha gathered her energy, as much as she could hold. A shimmering sphere of water began to grow between her paws. Blake reached out with his Aura, holding the sphere in place as Samantha filled it with power. The water writhed and raged within his grasp, but Blake did not let his strength waver for a moment.

"Two! Four! Six! Eight! Who do we appreciate?!" chanted Cheren.

"Blake and Samantha," said Iris, without much enthusiasm.

"Perior serperior," agreed Serperior.

"You think that's enough?" asked Blake.

"\_Yes! Throw it! Throw it!\_" wailed Snorlax, who was being severely trampled.

Samantha smiled the crooked smile Blake had grown to love. "\_I'm not gonna say 'I believe in you!' or anything dumb like that, but, well, do it!\_"\_><em>

Blake hurled the water with all his might.

The Colossal Haxorus just had time to screw his eyes shut before the attack slammed into his face. There was an explosion of water. Bricks, plaster and typewriters fell before the Colossal Hydreigon as he ploughed helplessly through the stricken typewriter repair shop, coming at last to rest in an alley, battered and soaked.

"\_You fools. Are you thinkingk zat's all I can be takingk?\_"

Snarling with a deep and primal fury, the Colossal Haxorus forced

himself onto his feet amid the rubble.

"\_I will be painstakingly obliteratingk you exactly as planned. Be prepaairngk to-\_"

"I'm not gonna tell you this again, you ugly git: wir sind die Jager! Sind die Jager, you hear me?!"

"\_Now vhat?!\_" the Colossal Haxorus groaned.

"Now THIS!" replied Zephyr. Leaping from the roof she'd been posing on (which, sadly, no-one had seen), Zephyr hurled a bolt of lightning at her colossal foe. Several million volts arced across his scales, tearing into his more conductive parts. His eyes went swirly as he finally fell, causing a minor earthquake.

For a few moments, no-one spoke. Zephyr dropped nimbly to the ground, sidestepping the broken fruit stall.

"Oh, my gosh, Zephyr, you're amazing!" squealed Iris, hugging Zephyr. "I was so blinded by Rashimo's awesomeness I didn't even notice you. I'm so sorry."

"Your warm and loving reception makes me giddy with joy," said Zephyr. "Anyway, you'll never guess who I crash-landed next to."

Cheren raised a hand. "The druddigon Whitney met near Icirrus City. Druddogigar, wasn't it?"

Zephyr's eyes widened. "Why, I- I did indeed land near Druddogigar. Our old friend Heidi was there too, for some reason."

"Heidi? From the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation?"

"Indeed. I'm not entirely sure what they were doing, but Heidi was giggling like crazy. We didn't talk long. Druddogigar confirmed my suspicions: Ghetsis is behind this whole affair. Apparently, he wrote some letters or something. I don't really understand it," Zephyr recounted. "Anyway, I came back here as fast as I could."

"And you were just in time," said Blake. "There's one thing I don't understand, though."

"Yes?"

"Who's Cindy Jaeger?"

Zephyr blinked.

"Well, you kept saying "Wir Cindy Jaeger" and stuff, so who is she?"

"Blake, I was saying "Wir sind die Jager". "Wir... sind... die... Jager". It means "We are the hunters", all right?" sighed Zephyr.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about! Who's Cindy Jaeger?" Blake insisted.

"There is no Cindy Jaeger! She's completely immaterial!" snapped Zephyr.

"What, her name's really Immaterial? Then... why would she call herself Cindy?" said Blake, completely bewildered.

Zephyr burst into tears.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>In the name of Victory road, of all who dwell there and all who commute there every day from a two-bedroom house in a village near Nimbasa City- looking at you, Shauntal- prepare for battle! The hour of our vengeance is now at hand! Drayden, the treacherous gym leader and mayor, which, frankly, is a high-ranking position too far, will be slain. His people shall be scattered on the wind, his crops salted, his city burned. Drayden believes he is the master of all dragons, that he can exploit us for his own purposes, but we are stronger than he could ever be. His arrogance cannot go unanswered. On this day, humanity will remember the fear of being our prey, the futility of trying to capture us or even get a selfie with one of us. We will gorge ourselves on their flesh!<em>"

"\_I'm not sure about that last bit,\_" Deino muttered. "\_I mean, I'd eat a human if I had to, but should we really, like, gorge ourselves? On the species that invented indoor plumbing and full English breakfasts and bicycles?!\_"

"\_I get your point. It'd be a shame to quit now, though,\_" her brother Deino pointed out, barely audible above the cheers rising around him.

"\_Chaaaaaaarge!\_" Anheindra finished, sending a dragon pulse screaming into the sky.

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm getting a weird feeling of deja-vu," Bianca commented as the horde of dragon-type pokÃ©mon charged towards Opelucid City.<p>

"I'm not. Last time, I thought we might actually win," said Stacey grimly.

Of the people of Opelucid City, only a handful (thirty percent of the population) remained: the brave, the stupid, the stupidly brave, the sensibly brave, the brave with average intelligence, most of the professional warriors and pokÃ©mon trainers, and

Whitney shot Stacey the most angry look she could bear to, which was about as angry as an adorable pikachu who's just won the lottery. "Of course we can win! It's just a matter of, uh, not losing. As long as there's blood in our veins, or whatever substances we use instead of blood, we'll fight! Most of the pokÃ©mon with us've recovered from the last battle, and the dragons out there are, uh..."

"\_Durants have a sort of oily substance,\_" Durant piped up. "\_It helps lubricate our insides as well as carrying oxygen around.\_"

"Go on, Whitney. What were you saying about the dragons out there?" Drayden prompted.

"Well, um... We've got to try!" Whitney declared. Righteous anger flared in her eyes. "No matter how you look at it, we can only win if we dare to fight in the first place. If we run, our enemies win by default. If we stand and fight, we might win, and if we're thrashed, at least we tried. No-one can take that away from us."

"But... What if we die? If our buckets get kicked, won't that sort of negate the fact that we tried our hardest?" said Stacey, in a small voice.

"You're right, that would be a huge bummer. What about all the people who can't fight, though? The ones we're protecting? If we just run away, soon they'll be the ones with their buckets kicked, debating whether having tried their hardest still counts."

Stacey's eyes went as wide as saucers. "That... that didn't occur to me." For a few seconds, fear and indecision were writ plainly over her face. Trembling, she placed her hand over her heart. "I... I'll fight!"

Realizing the conversation was pretty much done, the draconic legion poured over and around (mostly around) the ruined wall.

"I can't take much more of this deja vu..." groaned Bianca.

### 33. Chapter 33: More Shingeki, More Strife

\*\*~Chapter Thirty-three: The Siege of Opelucid City, Part 3! Why am I Bothering to Apologise to Hajime Isayama? He'd Love This. (Probably. Hopefully. Well, maybe, if he even read it, which isn't likely, to be honest.)~\*\*

Air ruffled Heidi's crest as she soared over the mountains. She was late, she knew, but she still had to try, even with Druddogigar clinging onto her.

"\_Hold tight, dear fellow. Opelucid City is just a few miles hence,\_" Heidi reported.

Druddogigar said nothing, keeping his jaws firmly clamped on his friend's tail.

"\_Once we get there, I'll drop you off in the south of the city and try to find my sister. I'm sure I can talk her out of this pointless war.\_"

Druddogigar said nothing.

"\_Look, I know you'd like to give Annie a piece of your mind, but she's my responsibility. All the people of Victory Road are. It's time I faced up to that.\_"

Druddogigar said nothing.

Heidi smiled. "\_I'm glad you're with me, Druddogigar.\_"

\* \* \*



><p>"How many?"<p>

"Three. One axew, one fraxure, one deino," said Cheren tersely. He handed Blake the binoculars. "Whose turn is it?"

"Yours."

"This time, try not to be so snide and condescending. We're dealing with proud, fearsome pokÃ©mon, so it's best to treat them with respect," Iris suggested.

"Very well. I doubt I can talk them out of attacking, though. It never seems to work," said Cheren.

"We've got to try, though," Iris insisted.

As Cheren dashed over the rooftops, scarf dancing in the wind, occasionally falling down to earth and having to shinny up a drainpipe or climb up on a wheelie bin, he took a moment to gather his thoughts. Quite a few dragons had got through the defences, plus a jolteon for some reason, but they'd kept them all at bay. A few oran berries and revives had patched everyone up nicely after the Colossal Haxorus's attack; now, they just had to endure. Or organise a hasty evacuation.

\* \* \*

><p>Cheren came to a halt at the edge of a row of terraced houses, careful not to lean too far over the edge. The fraxure and axew were getting a spot of rampaging done, smashing windows and a relatively fragile car, the deino trailing along behind them. He looked completely lost. Cheren leapt down from the roof, nailing the landing for once.<p>

"Halt, dragons! In the name of Truth, Ideals and the Unovan Way, I command you to stand down!"

The fraxure turned her baleful eyes upon him. "Fraxure rax frarax."

Cheren's eyes widened. Even if he couldn't fully understand her, he knew Fraxurese swearing, and she'd just used every curse in the book. "I'm, uh, afraid it probably won't fit. This is irrelevant, though." He hurled Cinccino's pokÃ©-ball into the air. "Attack!"

The fraxure grunted a few orders at the axew. He and the deino rushed off towards the city square.

\_Dash it all.\_ "Cinccino, hyper voice!"

Quick as a flash, Cinccino took a deep breath and howled with all his might, blasting the fraxure with sound waves.

Diverting his attention for a moment, Cheren retrieved Unfezant's pokÃ©-ball. "Unfezant, take down those small dragon-types! I'm giving you carte blanche, so don't hold back!"

With a fearsome battle-caw, Unfezant took wing, soaring after the axew and deino.

The fraxure was taking swipes at Cincino, tusks blazing with purple light. "Cincino, get back! Use sing!"

Cincino somersaulted backwards, singing a lullaby before his paws touched the ground. The fraxure's eyelids drooped, she flopped down onto the road and began to snore.

"\_Loud, isn't she?\_" Cincino observed.

"I daresay," said Cheren daringly. "So are you, though, in other ways. Good work."

Cincino flushed with pride. Wordlessly, he and Cheren pulled the fraxure onto the pavement, resting her against some shrubbery. Cheren recalled Cincino and cast his eyes over the buildings to either side. A small tree, some window ledges just too far apart for easy climbing; not a good place to get onto the rooftops. There was nothing else for it. He'd have to go after Unfezant the boring way-

"Rooooaaar!"

Cheren went pale. Was that an actual savage bellow, or just someone shouting "Rooooaaar!"?

\* \* \*

><p>"So, um, when does Cindy Yeager get here?" asked Blake.<p>

"I want a new Hero of Truth, Arceus damn it!" Zephyr bellowed, with partial savageness.

\* \* \*

><p>With a bona-fide savage bellow, a zweilous pounced on Whitney, slamming her onto the dusty ground. Ignoring the throbbing pain in her spine, Whitney grabbed the zweilous's necks, desperately holding her snapping, slavering jaws at bay.<p>

"Oh, for some mouthwash and a couple of sandbags..." Whitney groaned.

Outrage was a fearsome attack, but it drove the user berserk, quite literally. It couldn't be more than a minute until the zweilous became confused, a minute longer than Whitney could hold her off.

"Aaaargh! Not the face! Not the face!" screamed Whitney.

"\_Okay,\_" said the zweilous pleasantly, and she began jumping up and down on Whitney like a savage trampolinist.

This was bad. Zweilouses were heavy. Whitney knew a few more jumps would knock her out cold. She'd recover quickly if the zweilous left her alone, but another twenty or so jumps while she was out could kill her. All her pokÃ©mon were busy with their own fights and Stacey was operating laser turret (a three-hundred-year-old relic, just recently brought back into service), so she couldn't count on anyone else coming to her rescue. She wasn't done yet, though.

"Fire of Ideals or whatever, come to me!" gasped Whitney. "Fire blast!"

Nothing happened.

"Flamethrower!"

Nothing happened.

"Ember?" said Whitney hopefully, straining every fibre of her Aura.

Nothing continued to happen.

"I'm toast..." sighed Whitney.

"\_Then I shall top you with butter and devour you!\_" the zweilous roared, triumphant, rearing up for a finishing stomp.

"Y'know, you're awfully lucid for someone using outrage," said Whitney beligerently.

"\_I know. It comes from my parents. Everyone in my family can use outrage without becoming confused,\_" the zweilous explained.

"In other circumstances, I'd be impressed."

"\_I'll daresay you would,\_" the zweilous chuckled. "\_You're carrying yourself quite well, actually. Most humans couldn't last half as long as you.\_"

"Most humans get their pokÃ©mon to do all the fighting."

"\_Do you think that's wrong?\_"

"Probably. Don't get me wrong, there are lots of leaderly, fair-minded pokÃ©mon trainers out there, but it isn't right to shy away from physical activity."

"\_Well, that's great.\_"

"Good."

There was an awkward pause.

"\_Even if you are an honourable pokÃ©mon trainer, I still have to fight you,\_" said the zweilous apologetically. "\_Orders, you know.\_"

"I understand. Thanks for being distracted, by the way. Eat metal claw!" Whitney yelled, filling her hand with Aura. Instead of a steely grey, however, her hand blazed with purple light.

"What the-?!"

"\_Whitney, your Aura, it's-!\_"

Whitney blinked. The zweilous blinked.

"How... how did you know my name?"

"\_The same way you just learned dragon claw, presumably.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>Two hydreigons stalked towards Cheren and Cinccino. One look at them was enough to confirm that they wouldn't be negotiating any time soon. (Well, the one on the left might, but the other one could certainly talk her out of it.)<p>

"Sawk, come forth!" yelled Cheren, releasing Sawk. "I'll need you to keep both those hydreigons occupied while Cinccino disables them. Understood?"

Sawk nodded, a fearsome look of determination on her normally fierce and determined face.

This would be a risky strategy, but Cheren had faith in Sawk. Hydreigons were part dark-type, too, so she had the advantage. "Close combat!"

Sawk leapt at the rightmost hydreigon, aiming a kick at his central head. The dragon reacted instantly, whirling around to slam his tail into Sawk's foot. Pain shot through Sawk's leg. Fighting through the agony, Sawk grabbed the hydreigon's tail and swung him over her head, slamming him into the ground. Satisfied, she pummeled him.

"Uh, I did say \_both\_ hydreigons, didn't I? Both?" said Cheren nervously, backing away from the other dragon. "Cinccino, quick! Sing!"

Cinccino burst desperately into song. Fighting through the power of his lullaby, the female hydreigon loosed a shimmering pulse of dragonfire, knocking him head-over-heels. Cheren dove out of the way, the attack singeing his scarf as he fell.

"Can't any item of my clothing escape from harm?" Cheren muttered darkly. He quickly took stock of the battle: Sawk had the male hydreigon on the ropes, but he'd managed to set her on fire. Cinccino was winded but far from defeated. Unfezant was nowhere to be seen.

"Cinccino, be sure to keep your distance. Use swift!"

Keeping his distance, Cinccino used swift. A stream of glowing stars battered the hydreigon, knocking out one of her lateral heads. That wouldn't do any good, though; a hydreigon's intelligence was entirely in its central head, with the lateral ones acting more like hands. Kind of disturbing, considering that zweilouises, which evolve into hydreigons, have two separate brains.

The hydreigon loosed another dragon pulse. Cinccino leapt to the side, readying another volley of stars. Before he could throw them, a heavy, clawed foot kicked him into a noodle shop.

Cheren's heart leapt into his throat. There were no mistaking thick black claws like those. A tyrantrum. How such a heavy pokÃ©mon could sneak up on him and Cinccino was anybody's guess.

Sawk stepped calmly down from the unconscious hydreigon, ignoring the

other one for now. She was charred in a few places but her eyes still shone. "\_My speciality involves rock-type pokÃ©mon and the pulverisation thereof. Also dark-types, as this unfortunate hydreigon has found out. If you wish for a sample of my power, you have only to-\_"

The tyrantrum used earthquake.

Cheren cleared his throat. "Mister Tyrantrum, Sir, perhaps we can be reasonable about this-"

"\_I wouldn't really describe myself as a "mister". If you want to be respectful, just call me Senpai.\_"

"Well, certainly." Cheren cleared his throat. "Can't we talk about this, Senpai? I mean, at the end of the day, I'm sure we're both tired of violence. What say we lay aside our arms and negotiate?"

The tyrantrum glanced over their shoulder at the four hydreigons, two salamences, one dragonite, two druddigons, a goodra and three haxori gathered behind them. They all shook their heads.

"\_Well, look on the bright side, boy with scarf: at least, at the very end, Senpai noticed you,\_" the tyrantrum laughed. "\_This is for my nephew. Get him!\_"

"I regret that I have but one life to give for my country!" whimpered Cheren, screwing his eyes shut.

There was another savage bellow and a rush of movement, a blast of light and heat. Concrete cracked. Masonry shattered. \_This is it, \_Cheren reflected. \_I'm done for. Tell Tabitha I, uh, care deeply for her.\_

After a few moments of terror, however, Cheren began to realise he wasn't dead. He gingerly opened his eyes.

"What the-?!"

The biggest druddigon Cheren had ever seen leaned against the ruined noodle shop, his eyes blazing with emerald light. Senpai the Genderless Tyrantrum lay unconscious on top of two of their comrades.

"I... I don't believe it!"

"\_Nor do we,\_" said one of the haxori nervously.

Druddogigar, for it was he, let out a ferocious roar. Purple fire flared around his craggy scales.

"\_I believe he's using outrage,\_" commented Serperior, who'd popped out to watch.

"Thanks for telling me. I'd never have guessed otherwise," muttered Cheren.

The two looked on in amazement as Druddogigar tore into the pack of dragons. He kicked them, bit them, punched them, clawed at them, bit

them some more, and, when he couldn't find any within reach, threw chunks of masonry. With a single punch, he hurled the goodra clean over the block, where she collided with a clock tower and slid slowly to the ground.

"Amazing...!" breathed Cheren. "It's as if all the rage of Opelucid City is contained within this one rogue druddigon!"

"\_That's a bit of an obvious reference, isn't it?\_" said Serperior, raising an eyebrow.

"Reference? To what?"

"\_Attack on Titan.\_"

"Attack on what now?!"

"\_Forget it...\_"

As Druddogigar slowly came to a halt, surrounded by unconscious dragon-types, the confusion set in.

"\_I'm a little teapot, short and stout,\_" sang Druddogigar. "\_Here's my handle, here's my spout. When the kettle boils, hear me SHHHOOOOUUUUUT...!\_"

Cheren looked at Serperior, who shrugged.

"\_Tip me up, and... and...? How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if-\_"

Druddogigar fell flat on his face.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey, Drayden! Brilliant news!" called Whitney, dodging past countless combatants and a smattering of impact craters as she ran over to Drayden.<p>

"Little busy right now," the burly gym leader pointed out, not taking his eyes off the hydreigon he was wrestling to the ground.

"Well, perhaps I'll just demonstrate. Dragon pulse!"

Drayden and the hydreigon looked on in amazement as a ball of purple light formed between Whitney's outstretched hands. Drayden continued to look on in amazement as it struck the hydreigon right between the eyes, knocking him out cold.

"Good heavens, Blazeheart, have you been holding out on us all along?!" Drayden chuckled. "How did you come by this technique?"

"It's a long story," said Whitney. She flinched as a stray electro ball flew over her head. "Probably best for after the battle, y'know?"

"Oh, I'm sure they'll wait for us. They always do," Drayden insisted.

"Okay. Well, I met this zweilous during the fight. She was sort of using outrage and jumping up and down on me, so we started talking, and we're sort of friends now. I think she helped awaken my dragon-type Aura."

Drayden waited a few seconds to see if Whitney was going to continue, then, realising she wasn't, he spoke. "You call that a long story?"

"...Yes?" Whitney shifted nervously. "I suppose it wasn't \_that\_ long, but, well, I, uh, um... Well, what are you gonna do about it?!"

"Nothing. Still, it is fortuitous that your powers have grown," Drayden declared. "Before long, I fear they will be in even greater need."

"Like when?"

With a rush of wind so loud that Whitney feared her ears would explode, Anheidrus'oxyde rose over a brick still stubbornly cemented atop two other bricks, the last remnant of the wall. Her six wings beat out a rhythm as slow and powerful as the heartbeat of a vast and ancient beast, and in her eyes a red fire burned at the centre of a black abyss. The very air burned as it caught on her razor-sharp scales, flaring purple and blue around her crest.

"Annie's here," said Whitney matter-of-factly.

The queen faltered for a moment. "\_I... If you must refer to me by a cute nickname, call me Anheindra. Nobody calls me Annie.\_"

"...Of course people call you Annie. I just did."

Drayden laid a moderating hand on Whitney's shoulder. "I wouldn't. The wrath of any hydreigon is no laughing matter, and this one is the ruler of all the pokÃ©mon of Victory Road."

"\_My reputation precedes me. I presume you ignored the Colossal Haxorus's request for parley?\_"

Whitney scoffed.

"If you mean that enormous mutant haxorus, all he did was talk at us in German," said Drayden, cutting off any wrath-inducing remarks. "My second-in-command reports that he then rampaged through the city, causing significant damage until he was finally brought down."

"\_...German? Second in command?\_"

"German. The language people speak in Germany," said Drayden patiently. "As for my second-in-command, that's Iris."

"\_All Kerschplinty-Vagensvagen von Hautkopff told me was that he spoke Human,\_" Anheindra ground out. "\_It matters not. Surely you had an interpreter on hand?\_"

"No."

"\_Oh. Well, forget him! You would never have negotiated anyway.\_"

"We're negotiating now, aren't we?" Drayden pointed out.

Whitney could tell Anheidra was taken aback. Anger, confusion and a miscellaneous facial expression vied for dominance on her face.

"\_Technically, we could be negotiating, but...\_" Anheidra's brow creased. "\_This... this changes nothing. You know why we're attacking your city.\_"

Of course anger won. The dragons were gathering behind Anheidra, egging her on, jeering at what remained of Opelucid City's defences. On the other hand, most of the actual fighting had stopped so everybody could listen, so there was still hope.

"\_You tricked my people and the Elite Four into waging a pointless battle in which forty of my people and one of the Elite Four perished. You owe us forty-one lives, which I fully intend to claim, even if Shauntal's a bit squeamish about public executions.\_"

"That reminds me. Did your guy Michael ever get through to the Elite Four?" asked Whitney.

"\_Shut your face, you impertinent brat!\_ \_This conversation has gone on for far too long.\_" Raising her head to the sky, Anheidra spat out a glowing yellow fireball.

Drayden's eyes widened. "She's using draco meteor! Cover your head!"

Dust and fire streamed off the glowing sphere as it careened into the air, far above the dusty, chargrilled battlefield below. At the zenith of its climb the fireball exploded, shattering into countless embers of purple dragonfire. The embers grew into blazing meteorites as they screamed through the air, bearing down on the ragged lines of defence below.

"Well, we're toast," sighed Whitney.

Drayden gave her a look. "How can you be so blasÃ© about this?"

"I don't know... Dying can't be \_that\_ bad, right?"

Drayden sighed and shook his head. "If I'd've known pressuring your child into learning how to code could have such severe side-effects..."

"My friends could resurrect me, if push came to shove. Stacey'd know how to-" A chill ran down Whitney's spine. "Stacey. She's in the turret. W-what if it collapses on top of her and catches fire? What about Durant and Weezing and everyone?! They're scattered like leaves on the wind! I should never have let them out of my sight! \_They're all gonna die!\_" Whitney clamped her hands over her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks and pooling around her wrists. For the first time in her life, she felt as if she might lose everyth-

"This one's for Cindy Yeager. Blast burn!"



\* \* \*

><p>"Um, hello? Sir? Ma'am? Senpai?" said Cheren nervously, waving a hand over Druddogigar's unseeing eyes.<p>

"\_He's a sir. I'm pretty sure of it,\_" said Serperior.

"I see. Thanks." Cheren cleared his throat. "Wake up!"

Druddogigar shifted. "\_What's... what's this? Person in scarf? Take this!\_"

Hardly knowing whether to laugh or call an ambulance, Cheren could only look on in amazement as Druddogigar punched himself in the muzzle.

\* \* \*

><p>"Rashimo," said Whitney shakily, "who's Cindy Yeager?"<p>

"Some gel Zephyr told me about when I was messengerin'," the Avatar of Reshiram replied. "Sorry about yer hair, by the way."

"No worries. It'll probably grow back overnight."

Dust filled the air, falling softly upon disappointed dragons, relieved Opelucians and a few still-glowing fragments of draco meteor.

Drayden broke the silence. "Your Majesty, I assume you remember Rashimo, Son of the Volcano, Avatar of Reshiram?"

"\_Vaguely.\_"

"Of course she remembers me. We met scarcely half an hour ago, over in yon forest of whacking great pines," Rashimo reminded Drayden.

"Oh, if I only had the bally Light Stone..."

"\_I could take Reshiram,\_" said Anheidra coldly.

"You could try."

"Can we maybe get a move-on?" suggested Drayden.

Anheidra's gaze fell upon the burly gym leader. "\_Oh, yes, I almost forgot.\_" In a flash, her jaws went for Drayden's beard, but he was too quick for her, diving aside and landing roughly on Durant.

"Durant! You made it!" cried Whitney, shoving Drayden off her battered metal friend. "I'm so glad you're all right. For a moment there, I thought I... I'd never see you again." Weeping with joy, she buried her face in Durant's cold, hard exoskeleton, drinking in his familiar metallic smell.

A short way away, watched over by a bemused Rashimo, Drayden rose to his feet like the break of dawn. "I'm fed to the back teeth with this nonsense. Everyone SHUT UP!"

Against all the odds, everybody shut up.

"We're going to do this climactic confrontation \_properly,\_ is that clear? Is that too much to ask?!"

Whitney, Rashimo and Durant shook their heads in meek silence.

"Right. Good." Drayden considered his pokÃ©-balls for a moment, at last selecting a worn great-ball. "Haxorus, I choose you!"

The mighty axe-headed therapod burst out of his ball with a flash of blue light.

"Dual chop!"

If Haxorus had any doubts about battling the queen of Victory Road, he didn't show them, instead hacking at her torso with all his might. Anheidra howled in pain, reeling back from the onslaught.

Hope surged up from Whitney's heart. "You can do it, noble haxorus! Go the distance!"

Anheidra used dragon pulse.

\* \* \*

><p>"I don't believe it! It's really him!" Iris gasped, her eyes sparkling with delight. "Druddogigar, the last of the ancient druddigon clans of the Far North! He who slew the first king of the gyarados, carved the twelfth face on Mount Rushmore, forged the Talon of Braviary, sired over a thousand children by-<p>

"\_All right, all right, no need to remind everyone of that,\_" said Druddogigar quickly. "\_'Tis true, I am Druddogigar, son of Varisragar and Rhugrairon, last of the ancient druddigon clans of the Far North, friend of the contemporary druddigon clans of the Near North, etcetera etcetera. Has anyone seen Whitney Blazeheart?\_"

"Of course. We've seen her loads of times," said Blake. "She's a little bit taller than me, sort of brawny and stocky, white skin, ginger hair, loads of freckles-"

"Shut up, Bianca," Cheren interrupted. "Whitney should be defending the northern wall-"

"What do you mean, "Bianca"?! I'm Blake!"

"...Blake?" Cheren blinked. "Oh, yes, so you are."

"\_Northern wall. Right. Got it,\_" said Druddogigar, cutting off any further witty banter. "\_The power I felt from the north... Of course 'twould be the Blazeheart child. By the way, has the errant Princess Heidrocarbon passed you by?\_"

"Princess Heidrocarbon?" Iris repeated.

"Never heard of her," said Cheren.

"\_Oh, I'm pretty sure you have. You probably know her as Heidi, agent

of the P.L.A.S.M.A Foundation.\_"

Blake felt as if a thunderclap had split his head in two. Heidi, a princess?! It was unthinkable. Inconcievable! "Heidi, a princess?! That's unthinkable. Inconcievable!"

"Pretty good twist, I thought. Nobody could've seen that coming!" Zephyr commented.

"\_I'm glad you think so. It's still a major spoiler, though, so don't let on,\_" Druddogigar warned them, rising to his feet. "\_Anyway, I'll be off to the northern wall. Good luck with the battle.\_"

As Druddogigar loped off into the distance, the gang stood in contemplative silence. A part of Blake wished he was going with Druddogigar, but they had a job to do. The Hero of Truth would never abandon defenceless civilians in favour of some hypothetical excitement at the northern wall.

"Come on! Let's go!" cried Iris, grabbing Cheren by the scarf and rushing off after Druddogigar.

"Oh, Arceus..." sighed Blake.

\* \* \*

><p>"Speak to me, Haxorus!" wailed Drayden, cradling Haxorus's limp form in his arms. This noble haxorus had been unable to do it. He hadn't gone the distance.<p>

Roaring with triumphant laughter, Anheidra turned to face the dragon-types crowding behind her. "\_See how easily these weak, coddled excuses for pokÃ©mon crumble before us! If you need any more proof of what a terrible gym leader Drayden is, look no further. Shauntal! Shauntal, get over here!\_"

"\_I think she fell down a hole,\_" said a nervous fraxure.

"\_Oh. Well, she is of no consequence. Let's get on with razing Opelucid City to the ground.\_"

A cheer arose from Anheidra's army.

"\_Kill them all! You will give them no quarter, nor will you take none! Turn this so-called Opelucid so-called City into the Distortion Realm! Charge!\_"

A ragged cheer arose from the more aggressive elements.

"Not so fast, bidoof-brains. You may have got past Drayden, but you won't get past me. Somehow." Whitney folded her arms, glaring defiance at the Queen of Victory Road.

Anheidra sighed.

Taking the sigh for her cue, Whitney attacked. "Dragon puls-"

A roaring beam of energy blasted into Whitney, knocking her clean into next week.

"\_Y'know, she was really annoying. I'm glad to be rid of her.\_"

"Well, you're still not rid of me. By jingo, I'll blast you to blazes if it's the last thing I do!" declared Rashimo.

Anheidra used dragon tail.

"Typical, really," Rashimo said glumly, as he sailed off into the blue yonder.

Durant suddenly felt very much alone. "\_I, uh, don't suppose you'd be prepared to negotiate?\_"

"\_You can surrender.\_"

"\_Well, I -\_"

"\_Too slow.\_" Anheidra used fire fang. Ignoring Durant's vigorous protests, she shook him like a ragdoll, only spitting him out on top of Drayden when he was thoroughly unconscious.

After a moment's contemplation, Drayden bravely decided to stay where he was and cry for a bit. Durant would make for a pretty good blanket, Haxorus was the perfect pillow, and it wasn't as if he'd do any good fighting. No-one would. Who could ever hope to match the fury of Anheidrus'oxyde?

"\_Hold it right there, you miserable excuse for a queen!\_" roared Druddogigar.

"\_Oh, Annie, please come to your senses. Haven't enough lives been ruined already?!\_" Heidi pleaded.

"\_What?! Who?! I-I mean, don't call me Annie!\_"

Drayden smiled. He'd always believed in the nick of time.

Panting, Cheren and Iris drew to a halt beside the two dragon-types. PokÃ©mon like them could certainly move when they needed to. Iris immediately spotted Drayden, struggling with the floppy, limb-laden bulk of Durant.

"Hold on, Grandpa! I'll help you!" called Iris, rushing over to him.

"Ah, jolly good. Take this durant off my hands, will you?" said Drayden, thrusting Durant into Iris's arms. She barely managed to hold him. "Princess Heidrocabon, I'm glad you're here. And, uh, who are you?"

"\_Druddogigar.\_"

"What, really?!"

"\_What, really?\_" cried most of the female dragon-types, a few of the males and everyone else with a crush on Druddogigar.

"\_Ohmygosh, it's really him!\_"

"\_He's so dreamy...\_"

"\_So, so dreamy...!\_"

"\_He is nothing more than the latest instalment in a parade of witless babblers determined to drive me to distraction,\_" Anheidra ground out, making a mental note to burn all the posters on her bedroom wall. "\_How dare you show your face here, after what you did to my father?!\_"

"\_...I gave him a herbal remedy to help stop his necks getting tangled.\_"

"\_...Oh. Well, it... it must've been...\_" Anheidra considered things for a moment, then rounded on Heidi. "\_How dare you show your faces here, after you abandoned me all those years ago?! You and that wretched bunch of self-righteous P.L.A.S.M.A guttersnipes, always inserting your noses where they don't belong...!\_"

"\_We're a pokÃ©mon rights organisation, dedicated to preserving the rights of pokÃ©mon,\_" Heidi pointed out. "\_As for me abandoning you, you said you were happy for me. I've visited you loads of times.\_"

"\_I... Well... That still doesn't change anything! I fully intend to destroy Opelucid City!\_"

"\_Actually, that's what we wanted to talk to you about. We've uncovered evidence that Ghetsis is behind all this, not Drayden.\_"

"\_Of course you have,\_" said Anheidra resignedly.

Heidi retrieved a scrap of paper from... somewhere. "\_This is a copy of Ghetsis's autograph. Have a look.\_"

Anheidra cast her eyes over the autograph. It read: "To my highly attractive friend Irascebeth. -Ghetsis, Master of Evil :-)"

"\_...Irascebeth? What sort of a pseudonym is that?\_"

"\_I was in a hurry, all right?\_ \_Now, if you don't mind, let's compare it with the letters that started this whole sorry ordeal.\_"

"\_That may be a problem. Shauntal's got them,\_" Anheidra pointed out. She glanced over her shoulder and called out, "\_Anyone seen Shauntal?!\_"

"\_She, uh...\_" A deino whispered something into the nervous fraxure's ear. His face brightened. "\_She's out of the hole! ...Yes, what is it?\_" The deino whispered some more. "\_...Oh. She and all her pokÃ©mon are descending upon Opelucid City like avenging angels.\_"

"\_Well, tell them to stop!\_" snapped Anheidra.

"\_Tell them to stop!\_" the fraxure relayed.

"\_Hey, hold on! Stop!\_" cried the deino, galloping over to Shauntal. She was only slightly dishevelled; the hole hadn't been that deep and she'd managed to land on her feet.

"Okay, we're stopping. What is it?"

"\_...Hold that thought.\_" The deino ran back to the fraxure. "\_What is it?\_"

"\_What is it?!\_" the fraxure called.

"\_We need the letters!\_" Anheidra responded.

"\_We need the letters,\_" the fraxure explained.

The deino hotfooted it over to Shauntal and the gang. "\_Her Majesty needs the letters.\_"

"Oh, right. Tell her I'll be along in a moment," said Shauntal.

The deino trotted back over to the fraxure. "\_She'll be along in a moment.\_"

"\_She'll be along in a moment!\_"

"\_Good. Tell her "thank you"!\_"

"\_Tell her "thank you".\_"

On the verge of despair, the deino trudged back over to Shauntal. "\_Her Majesty says "thank you".\_"

Shauntal was wise enough not to press the matter. She, Chandelure, Cofagrigus, Jellicent, Frosslass, Drifblim and Golurk, a chandelure, cofagrigris, jellicent, frosslass, drifblim and golurk respectively, wove past a scattering of confused, bored and relieved dragon-types, making straight for Anheidra.

"Is this good?" asked Cheren, looking to Iris for reassurance.

"Maybe. I've no idea," replied Iris. Cheren did not find much reassurance.

Heidi snatched the letters as soon as Shauntal produced them. She thoroughly examined each letter, then handed them and Ghetsis's autograph to Anheidra. "\_I believe you can tell they're the same hand. Note that when there are two lower-case Ts in a row, they share the same cross. All the writing seems to be done with the same pen, too.\_"

Anheidra was starting to feel a little silly. "\_Well, this is all, um, interesting. Very. We haven't seen an example of Drayden's handwriting, though, have we?\_"

"Here you go," said Drayden, handing her his shopping list.

"\_Two boxes eggs, one loaf bread, three sacks potatoes, one roast ox, one packet porridge oats, twelve boxes pokÃ©mon food, one packet special-edition Swiss cheese without any holes.\_" Stony-faced,

Anheidra dropped the shopping list. It fluttered softly to the ground. "\_That... that's a completely different hand.\_" Anheidra giggled. "\_We went after the wrong man. The wrong city. We were... I was... Well, we were tricked into a pointless war against innocents.\_" She burst into tears. "\_This is just great. Just perfect. Oh, this is rich. RICH! I won't accept this!\_"

Heidi rolled her eyes. "\_Here we go.\_"

"\_Don't you understand? I can't let everyone see me back down!\_" Anheidra hissed. "\_I mean, it's not as if there's anyone here powerful enough to defeat me legitimately. Except you two, of course, but it'd look bad if you attacked me during what's supposed to be a civilised-\_"

A plan was forming in Druddogigar's mind. He raised his voice as high as it would go. "\_What's that, Your Majesty?! You challenge me to a duel for the future of Opelucid City?!\_"

Anheidra stared at him. "\_That's not-!\_"

"\_BRILLIANT idea, sister! Such a plan would leave your honour intact, yet also give the innocent people of Opelucid City a chance not to be killed!\_" Heidi gushed, catching on fast. "\_Just one thing: why Druddogigar?!\_"

"\_Because he's cute when he's unconscious!\_" roared Anheidra. She understood their idea, and she was determined to embarrass Druddogigar. "\_We can afford no further delays or any time for awkward questions, but rest assured I am completely on top of this situation. Let's be about it. I will tear you apart, Rogue Druddigon!\_"

"\_Fall, Anheidrus'oxyde!\_"

"\_...Really? I thought you'd take that as an opportunity to call me Annie and get me riled up,\_" commented Anheidra. "\_Oh, well. Take this!\_"

Anheidra loosed a dragon pulse. Druddogigar leapt high above the shimmering pulse of dragonfire, extending his wings as he reached the apex of his jump. A druddigon's wings were hardly the greatest, but they gave him just enough control over his fall to slam Anheidra into the ground. He raised his hand for a final dragon claw, only to receive a face full of fire, ice and lightning.

"\_Uh, I'm supposed to be winning, aren't I? I mean, this is as good an end to the invasion as any...\_" said Druddogigar nervously.

Anheidra's only reply was a savage roar. She seemed to grow to twice her size, blazing with blue light as she charged her opponent headlong. Druddogigar smashed helplessly into the typewriter recycling workshop.

Iris's eyes were brimming with concern. "Druddogigar can beat her, right? I mean, druddigons are stronger..."

"\_Physically\_ stronger, yes. In every other area, hydreigons have the advantage," said Drayden grimly. "Fortunately, druddigons can use

superpower."

"Oh, a fighting-type move. Perfect!" declared Iris.

Anheidra used draco meteor.

"Oh, no, it can't end like this! It mustn't!" wailed Iris.

\* \* \*

><p>Whitney had managed to drag herself into the greengrocer's, which sold a few bespoke apostrophes on the side. She was out of the fight, she knew, but at least here she could rest up and maybe help herself to a cucumber.<p>

"Strange," Whitney said to herself between nibbles of crisp, fresh, juicy cucumber. "I'm suddenly reminded of how much I believe in Druddogigar."

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Right. No more delays. PokÃ©mon of Victory Road, the city is ours! Raze it to the ground! Come on, get moving! Hurry!<em>"

"\_What are you thinking?! Opelucid City's innocent! We have the proof!\_" said Heidi hotly. "\_You have no right to-\_"

Anheidra used dragon pulse.

"\_Owww...\_" whimpered Heidi.

Satisfied, Anheidra loosed a hyper beam into the city, blasting a hole through twelve buildings. She glanced back at Druddogigar. "\_I was wrong. You're not cute when you're unconscious.\_"

Deathly silent, Druddogigar rose to his feet, shaking some fragments of brick and plaster off his spikes. Purple fire roared across his craggy scales. "\_Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. Fall, Annie!\_"

"\_Yep, there we go. "Annie." For pity's sake, a queen deserves a more majestic name, such as... um...\_" Anheidra's eyes widened as Druddogigar began his charge, the power of outrage coursing through his veins. Perhaps she should get out of the way at some point?

Druddogigar slammed into Anheidra, grabbing hold of her lateral necks to keep her from getting away. A quick headbutt to the face started things off nicely, followed by a kick in the stomach, a punch between the central and rightmost necks, then as many kicks, bites, punches, slashes and stomps as he could manage.

"\_Yes indeedy, I should definitely have got out of the way at some point,\_" Anheidra ruefully reflected.

Druddogigar did not let up in his onslaught until Anheidra lay unconscious at his feet. Breathing raggedly, he loomed over his fallen enemy, inadvertantly drizzling her with saliva.

"...\_Well, come on. Come on! Get up so I can knock you out again!\_"



Druddogigar gave her head a gentle kick. "\_You can't be this tired already! It's not even tea time! Honestly, you lazy monarchs, so, uh... who are you? Who am I?\_" Druddogigar's eyes glazed over. He plunked down heavily on the ravaged ground. "\_I'll have the roast dodrio, please, and a cup of peppermint tea.\_"

End  
file.